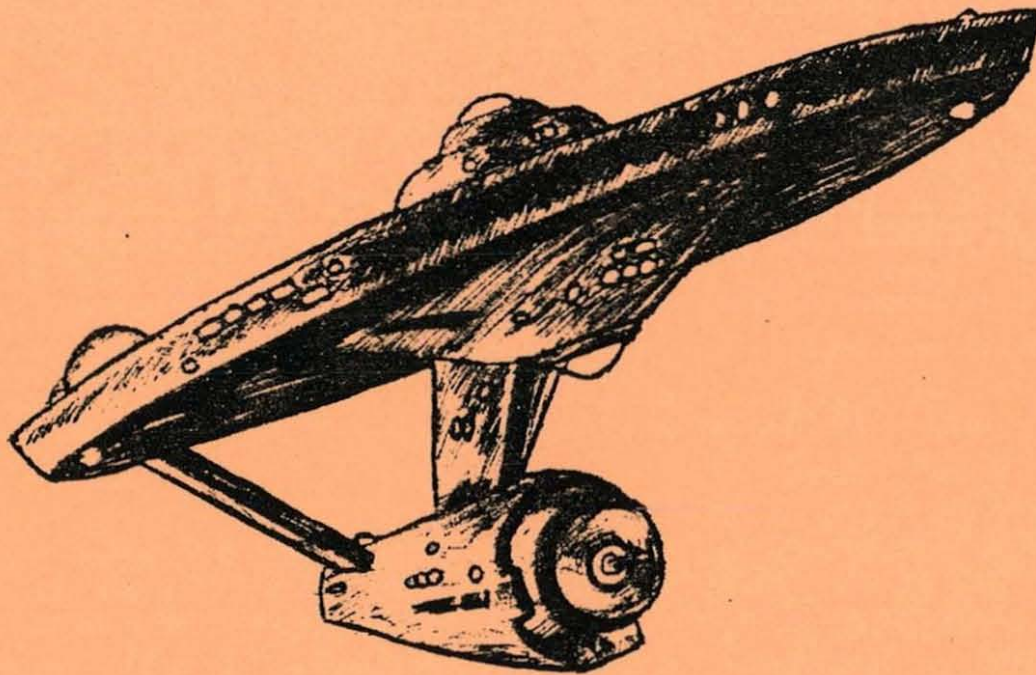


Scotpress

ENTERPRISE



INCIDENTS 6

STORIES BY

Jennifer

Guttridge

a STAR TREK

fanzine

ENTERPRISE INCIDENTS 6

Stories by Jennifer Guttridge

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A ScoTpress publication

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ScoTpress - Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini, Janet Quarton & Shona

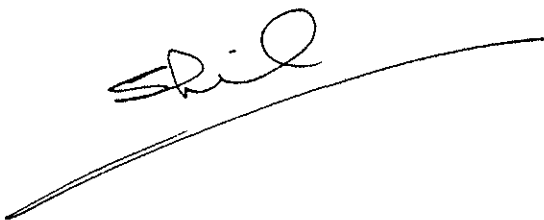
The name of Jennifer Guttridge is well-known to fandom because of her inclusion in Star Trek Lives and her stories in New Voyages (The Winged Dreamers and In the Maze). However, it's been a long time since any of her stories appeared in zine form - and even when they did, most of them were printed in America. Indeed, Jennifer has been out of contact with fandom for some years now.

Some months ago we contacted her and asked for permission to print some of her stories. We were delighted when she agreed, and especially so when we discovered that - although they were written fully ten years ago - six of the stories we asked her about were unprinted.

Three of these stories are printed here, along with Evil Is..., which was first printed in Log Entries 12 and has been out of print for several years. The other three unpublished stories will appear in Enterprise Incidents 7, planned for May.

I would like to thank Valerie and Janet very much for helping me with the typing of Jennifer's stories. The editorial workload is usually split so that Valerie types the material for Enterprise Log Entries, I type the material for the other zines, and Janet handles the printouts. However, as some of you may know, my father died suddenly in June and I found myself having to cope with all his jobs around the house and garden as well as trying to keep up with my own plays. It was my own plays that suffered while I tried to get myself organised. Janet and Valerie stepped into the breach, adding a lot of my ScoTpress work to their own, and it's mainly thanks to them that this zine is in your hands now. I'm very lucky to have two friends like them.

And I do hope that I've managed to get myself better organised for 1986!





THE RED VELVET LADY



McCoy gazed across the dying embers of the fire and deep into the woman's eyes. She was humanoid, but not Human, and her name was Ilee. McCoy's profession as a doctor and his years as a space medic had accustomed him to the unusual, and even the macabre, but this female was something different. She was gentle in appearance, with elongated, almond shaped eyes that were attractively large for her face, and tiny pointed ears that lay flat against her head and pricked towards him when he spoke. Her skin was femininely soft, and covered with a fine deep red fur that glowed warmly in the last of the light.

In the week that the officers and men of the Starship Enterprise had been among them they had come to like and admire these endearing people and their simple way of life, hunting and fishing beside the rivers of the flat coastal plains in spring and summer, and moving with the coming of autumn to these high caves and living on the fruits of the forest. An aura of peace and contentment enveloped the planet, and to a greater or lesser degree it had affected the entire crew.

Beyond the cave was the clearing that was the central hub of the community, and beyond that the forest where the glow-webs hung in profusion from the trees and the calls of the bell birds broke the night silence of the glades.

The hour was growing late, and the groups of contented natives were dispersing to the caves of their families. Reflected in the woman's eyes McCoy saw the last flame die and knew that the time had come for him to leave. He smiled and sighed and stood up, and with boneless grace she came to her feet beside him.

"I must go now," he said, trying to make his voice sound impersonal without being harsh.

"Go now, Mac-Coy," she echoed, and the sigh of her voice enchanted him.

As always he was dissatisfied as he walked away from her. There was no adequate way of taking leave of these people. He knew that if he turned and looked back she would still be there, standing beside the fire watching him; that she would not wave; and that if he went back to her she would greet him and make him welcome as if he were newly arrived. He knew also that he must on no account go back to her.

He stopped by the forked silver leafed tree at the edge of the clearing and produced his communicator from beneath his jacket. For a moment he stopped and looked up at the fairy-light stars in the sky. How bright they were, and how steadily they burned in the cold dark night.

He flipped open his communicator. "McCoy to Enterprise. Ready to beam aboard."

He shimmered briefly as the transporter beam reached down from the orbiting starship and touched him and carried him home.

The woman Ilee turned away and disappeared into the recessed shadows beyond the fire.

Two dark shadows crossed the clearing and soundlessly entered the forest.

Kiki was the adopted son and heir of Tiak, the tribal chieftan, and as befitted his station his bearing was princely. Kiki was a hunter, with the red fur beginning to grow thickly on his jaw and body. Kiki, at fourteen, was almost a man.

At dusk he had felt uneasy when he found himself separated from his companions and a long way from home. That unease had grown apace when he realized that the forest with all its attendant hazards lay in his path, and now that it was late and dark, and he was stranded and unsure of his way, it had developed into a terror that made him incapable of constructive thought or action. He was a little child again, alone and naked and afraid of the dark. In his hand he held his hunting spear, a shaft of peeled wood tipped with iron from the community forge. On a belt he carried a skinning knife with a curved bone handle and a crudely worked blade. These were his only weapons and his only means of defence, and against the forest at night they were grossly inadequate.

All around him the forest was green and damp and alive with rustlings and cracklings. Wide-eyed with fear he shuffled forward along the barely discernible path. The trees seemed to be leaning towards him, threatening. Spots of bright red fungal growth gleamed luminously at him like tiny malicious eyes from beneath the undergrowth and the drip of moisture sounded more than abnormally loud in the moments of absolute quiet.

The hour for sleep had long since come and gone, but Kiki dared not close his eyes even for a moment to rub the tired ache from them. The many deaths of the forest moved swiftly.

A stick cracked loudly on the path behind him - close behind him. He turned in wild alarm, his spear raised to defend himself. There was nothing but the empty woodlands faintly lit by starlight, but the forest had fallen strangely silent.

Kiki took an involuntary and unwise step backwards. Something rattled a loud warning, and again he spun round in terror. He found the symmetrical array of tentacles of an anwa flower straining towards him, sniffing his scent on the night air. Kiki froze, aware that the slightest movement would induce the plant/animal to strike. A tall black shadow loomed on the path behind him, hovered for a moment menacingly, then struck down, once, hard.

Kiki staggered forward, his eyes bulging fit to burst from their sockets, his numb hands dropping the spear and knife, his legs folding beneath him. The leathery tentacles of the anwa lashed out and caught him before he touched the ground and began to drag him towards the inverted and already oozing stomach.

McCoy suffered the most unpleasant dream. Someone - or something - was chasing him up a steep and seemingly endless incline, and he knew that once captured he would be trapped for eternity with no hope of ever recovering his freedom. In the dream he chanced to

look over his shoulder. His foot struck against something and he fell headlong. He had no chance to recover himself. Looking up, he found himself trapped. The native woman Ilee was standing over him. Her red fur was glowing and there was a look in her eyes that was both tender and demanding. She bent down with that curious double-jointed movement that made all her actions graceful. McCoy felt elation rising into ecstasy. Her face came close to him and her mouth opened as if to speak. McCoy heard a sharp insistent bleep in his left ear...

He jumped awake and found himself on his own bed with the coverlet in a rumpled heap on the floor and a considerable embarrassment higher up. The bedside intercom beeped again and McCoy flipped the switch with one hand, at the same time reaching for the cover with the other. "McCoy," he said grumpily.

"A call from the planet's surface, Doctor," said the voice of the Communications Officer. "There's an emergency requiring your attention."

"Someone broken a fingernail?" McCoy enquired.

"More serious than that, sir. It's one of the natives."

"On my way," said McCoy, and reached for his trousers.

He met Kirk in the doorway of the transporter room and both men acknowledged the look of undisputed sleep in the other's face.

"Some sort of accident?" McCoy asked.

"I'm not too sure, but we might be able to help."

"I don't know too much about the physiology of these people, Jim. They're not exactly textbook specimens, you know."

"I know you'll do your best, Bones." Kirk slipped into his jacket and took his place on the transporter platform. "Energise," he ordered.

They materialised side by side beneath the branches of the silver leaved tree. There was no movement in the clearing or on the slopes that led up to the caves, and the caves themselves were dark holes in the hillside. Considering the hour none of this was unusual, but from inside the forest Kirk and McCoy heard distant voices raised in excitement and gradually coming closer. This was unheard-of. No-one, and most certainly not the soft-fleshed, velvety skinned naked natives went into the forest at night.

The captain and the doctor shrugged their jackets closer round their shoulders in an attempt to fend off the biting cold and took a step or two nearer to the forest edge. Neither had any intention of going inside - neither was feeling particularly suicidal.

The voices approached, and through the trees they could see the light of the burning brands the natives carried to drive back the darkness. It was a small procession, and as it came closer to the clearing the shouting and the calling died down. No-one came running from the caves to find out what was happening, but both Kirk and McCoy had a feeling that the eyes of the silent women were watching.

The procession entered the clearing and the officers could see at once that they carried something on a litter slung on poles

between them. It was the body of an adolescent boy.

They set the litter down and McCoy immediately forgot about his bad dreams and became all doctor. On his knees he made a quick examination of the young man. Beneath the red fur there were clearly defined blue whip marks across the body and legs, and the face was badly swollen.

McCoy took only a few seconds to make his diagnosis. He looked at Kirk, and the answer was in his eyes before he spoke. "This boy can't use my help, Jim. He's dead."

A large fire was lit in the centre of the clearing and before it the body of the boy was set up in a sitting position enthroned in a bower of branches. Word of the death spread through the community as fast as a man could run, and as it reached each cave the men of the household came to pay homage to the dead prince and to keep vigil. The rhythmically swaying circle around the fire grew steadily larger, but the gathering grieved quietly, almost silently - scarcely a word was spoken.

Kirk and McCoy could do nothing but watch from the fringes, feeling ineffectual in the face of an ages-old ritual in which they had no part, and yet they could not simply turn away and leave these people with their loss. They felt in some indefinable way that it was their loss also.

Of the bereaved chieftain and his family there was no sign. They mourned alone in their own cave, but just a few minutes before the first light of dawn crept into the sky Bila, brother of the chief, left the circle of men and came across the clearing towards them. His head and hands had been shaved and looked starkly white against the deep shaggy red of his fur. He bowed low before Kirk and McCoy, and offered his empty hands, palms upwards.

"This is a time of great sadness for us, Kirk," he said formally, his accent burring the 'r' in Kirk's name. "He who was to be chief is dead, and it is a time for all the people to mourn."

"We sorrow deeply for what happened to the son of your brother," Kirk responded. "We mourn also."

"He was a young man of great promise. His name will be long remembered by all my people. Kirk, my brother Tiak does not wish you to think our hospitality lacking, but he is sure that you will understand his motives when he asks that you and your men do not come to the place-of-the-gathering during the time of mourning. You are welcome to continue your investigation of the hills-of-the-raincloud, but this is a time when the people would look inwards towards their own souls. The presence of outsiders..."

"We quite understand," Kirk told him feelingly. "We would not wish to intrude at this time of grief. I'll instruct my men to confine their activities to the hills, and not to come into this part of the forest."

"I'm grateful for your understanding, and so will my brother be, also."

"I hope that I may see your brother once again before we leave, to express my sorrow personally and to thank him for his

hospitality."

A frown creased the native's shorn features. "This I do not know. I will speak of the matter to my brother and the stone-that-speaks shall carry his answer." He bowed once more and turned and walked back to the circle of firelight. The two officers watched him go.

"Jim," McCoy said slowly, "I'd kinda like to take another look at that body."

"Huh?" Kirk looked at him. "Why?"

McCoy shovelled at the dirt with the toe of his boot. "I don't know. There's something about it bothering me, and I can't quite put my finger on it. If I could just make another examination..."

"The way they've got him all trussed up like a prize turkey I don't think you're likely to get the opportunity, Bones." Kirk looked towards the east, where the first light of the sun was tinging the sky with gold. Soon the great yellow orb would raise itself above the treeline and the forest would begin to steam itself dry. "I have to get aboard and redirect those landing parties. Are you coming?"

"I guess so. I want to check up on Spock."

Kirk opened his communicator. "Kirk to Enterprise. Beam us aboard."

Spock pulled a chair up to the briefing room table and lowered himself into it carefully so as not to jolt the pot belly he had developed in recent weeks. His face was pale and lined with weariness, and there was pain in his eyes, but he made no complaint. Behind him McCoy looked at Kirk and shook his head; as usual the Vulcan had refused the prescribed pain killers.

"It is unfortunate that we have been refused access to the settlement," Spock said, choosing to ignore Kirk's look of sympathetic enquiry. "They were beginning to prove a most valuable sociological study."

"It's unfortunate that a young man had to die," Kirk said, "but there's nothing we can do about either event. The primary purpose of our mission here was to establish friendly relations with the natives and to make a preliminary mineralogical survey of the northern hills. How is the survey progressing, Mr. Spock?"

"On schedule, Captain, and so far the results are proving most satisfactory. There are still three sectors to be investigated but the findings so far indicate that deposits of Sydium are substantial. This could be one of the richest planets in this sector of the galaxy."

"And then what happens?" growled McCoy. "Who gets the franchise to rob these people blind? A handful of glass beads for a shipload of Sydium, and probably a dose of a virus that'll wipe them out as an added bonus."

"The Federation won't allow that to happen, Bones," Kirk told him sternly. "If the deposits are rich enough to attract

unscrupulous prospectors, steps'll be taken to protect them. That's exactly the reason we're doing this work. Spock, how much longer before completion?"

"Ten days, if all goes according to plan."

"I'll leave it to you to see that it does. I've given instructions that no-one's to go near the native settlement for the rest of our stay. And that means *no-one*. I don't want anyone blundering in and damaging those friendly relations we've established so carefully."

Spock inclined his head. "I'll see to it that your instructions are carried out, Captain." He stood up with the same caution he'd used to sit down and gathered his papers together, knowing that Kirk and McCoy would welcome the opportunity to discuss him in his absence. "If you will excuse me, gentlemen?"

"Of course." Kirk watched him leave and looked at McCoy. The doctor was gazing after Spock with concern and a degree of sadness. "Bones?" he asked quietly.

McCoy sighed. "He's standing up to it pretty well, Jim. I've seen men on their backs writhing long before they reach Spock's stage. The next few days are bound to be pretty unpleasant for him, but the main thing is to prevent those parasites ripening and laying a fresh batch of eggs in his gut before they're expelled, otherwise he'll be re-infected inside two weeks."

"You can't let that happen, Bones."

"I won't."

The intercom bleeped and Kirk leaned over the computer unit and tipped the relevant switch. "Kirk here."

"Transporter room, sir. We're beaming up a casualty from the planet's surface - Crewman Khum had an accident with one of the forest creatures."

Kirk looked up in time to see McCoy vanishing through the door. "The doctor's on his way," he said.

The medical team loaded the moaning crewman onto the trolley and covered him to the chin with a green surgical sheet.

"That'll teach him to go poking in dark holes," McCoy muttered as he and Kirk grimly followed the procession to sickbay.

Kirk stood by and watched as the doctor deftly cut away the unfortunate man's shirt. The creature's stings had penetrated the material and their barbed tips were still embedded in his flesh, tiny blue hooks each with a small sac of poison still attached. Already the man's skin was erupting in blisters.

McCoy extracted three of the stings with tweezers and dropped them into a dish. "Analysis, please - and quickly!" he ordered.

"Bones?" Kirk looked over McCoy's shoulder. "Can you do anything for him?"

"I don't know!" McCoy snapped, then sighed. "I don't think so. I don't know enough."

"Spock to Captain Kirk," the intercom said in the Vulcan's voice.

Kirk crossed to the intercom on McCoy's desk. "Kirk here."

"I'm picking up some unaccountable sensor readings. I should like the opportunity to discuss them with you."

"Now?"

"If possible, sir."

Kirk looked at McCoy. "Bones?"

"There's nothing you can do here, Jim."

"I'll be right up, Mr. Spock." Kirk flipped the intercom off. "I'll be on the bridge, Doctor. Do what you can for him, and keep me informed."

McCoy turned back to his patient with tight lips. The crewman was breathing shallowly now, his pupils were dilated, and his gums were turning black and soft. The blisters on his arms and chest were bursting, and his skin appeared to be boiling.

It seemed that there was precious little he could do. Resigned, McCoy shot the contents of a hypo into the injured man's shoulder. "Take it easy now," he murmured, more for his own benefit than that of the tormented soul on the examination table.

The pain-darkened eyes rolled towards him. "Doctor?" The voice was a strangled gasp.

"It's all right, Khum." McCoy leaned over him, surprised that the man was able to recognise him and think coherently through his pain. "We're doing everything we can for you."

"Doctor!" The crewman's hand gripped McCoy's arm, his rigid fingers digging like claws deep into the doctor's flesh. "Tell... tell the Captain... I saw... saw..." His face contorted and he coughed up blood, then he relaxed. The breath whistled out through his teeth.

One by one McCoy pried the locked fingers from his arm and lifted the sheet to cover the still agonised face. With a sigh he turned to the intercom. "Sickbay to Captain Kirk."

"Kirk here," the Captain responded after a moment.

"Khum's dead, Jim," McCoy said wearily. "There was nothing I could do - nothing anyone could do."

"I understand, Bones."

"I'll run an autopsy and see what I can find out."

"I'll talk to you about it later, Doctor." Kirk switched off the intercom. "And someone called this planet peaceful and idyllic," he fretted, then caught the expectant glint in Spock's eye.

"No, Mr. Spock, I won't name it that, because you know, and I know, that it isn't."

"Indeed, Captain."

"Shall we go through it again? Just to be sure?"

"Captain." Spock looked at him reproachfully. "I do not have a parasitic infection of the brain."

Kirk managed a small grin. "I didn't mean to imply that, Mr. Spock. But I don't understand how another ship could pass through this system without being observed, at least in instruments."

Spock sat back in his chair and put his head back; it was a posture he had adopted of late and it seemed to ease his discomfort. "I do not say that a ship has passed through the system. I say merely that there is a trail of particles which strongly resemble those left in the wake of a warp powered space vessel."

"All right, assuming that it was a ship that left that particle trail, can you give me any idea of when it passed through, where it came from, and where it was headed?"

"From the particle dispersion it was in this vicinity between fifty and fifty-six hours ago. It came from the direction of Allution Ceti - and Captain, we have no reason to believe that it *did* pass through."

"Huh?"

Spock leaned forward and touched the computer, and a star chart appeared on one of the overhead screens. He picked up a stylus and got awkwardly to his feet. Kirk resisted the temptation to offer assistance.

"Allution Ceti," Spock said, pointing. "And we are here. Beyond this point there is a sizeable star desert. These systems, G. L. 7 and 8, are barren. There is no reason for anyone to go there. Beyond that there is only unexplored space."

"So it's unlikely that our visitors were passing through." Kirk traced the path back to Allution Ceti. "Mr. Spock, doesn't that bring us rather close to Klingon space?"

"Affirmative. The closest known Klingon outpost is here." Spock reached up to point then gasped with pain and doubled up over the computer, his face a deathly white.

As gently as he could Kirk manhandled him back into the chair. "I'll call Dr. McCoy."

"No." Spock shook his head. "It'll pass. There's nothing Dr. McCoy could do for me."

Kirk watched him uncertainly as he struggled to compose himself. "I think you'd better go down to sickbay."

"There is no need..." Spock broke off as another spasm wrenched at him.

"Sickbay!" the Captain insisted firmly.

McCoy straightened up and pulled a face. "I can put you to bed and give you a stiff sedative, but apart from that there's nothing I can do for you."

"That," said Spock, "is what I told the Captain. As for your offer of sedatives, Doctor, I thank you, but I would rather retain my mobility for as long as possible."

"I can't say that I blame you for that." McCoy dried his hands on a towel. "But you ought to be taking things more easily. You go stretching like that while those things have their hooks into you, and you're bound to get hurt. Stands to reason."

Gingerly Spock lowered his feet to the floor and slid off the examination table. "I shall endeavour not to incur their anger again," he said.

"You do that - and while you're doing it you can drink this." McCoy handed him a tumbler filled to the brim with a greenish milky fluid.

Spock sniffed at it and sipped it, and looked sour.

"Drink it down," McCoy ordered, "unless you want to play host to a second generation of your little internal pets?"

Obediently Spock drained the glass to the last drop.

"Every eight hours, and that's doctor's orders," McCoy told him. "And if you miss one you'll regret it."

"I understand, Doctor."

McCoy's eyes fell on the half written report on his table and his face folded itself into a frown as he thought about it. It was always difficult to rationalize a man's death into black and white cause and effect, and in this case he found it especially awkward. He was in no doubt as to *how* Khum had died; it was the *why* that bothered him.

The planet had killed him. The planet could be a hostile and deadly place, but McCoy knew that it could also be a place of peace and gentleness - and love. The woman Ilee knew many soft ways of love...

It was several minutes before he realized that the Vulcan was still standing there on the far side of the room watching him, and from the expression on his face, reading his mind. "Is there something else you need, Spock?" he growled.

"I was wondering if there was something you needed, Doctor?"

"Me? Need something from you?" McCoy tried to scoff, but it didn't come off.

Spock remained, waiting. "The Captain has forbidden all visits to the native settlement."

"I heard him."

"That means you cannot visit the lady."

McCoy swung round on him, his eyes blazing with fury. "You keep your damned Vulcan nose out of my business!"

"As you wish, Doctor."

Still Spock remained, and his presence began to make McCoy uneasy. He glared at the Vulcan.

"Look, Spock, if there's nothing else I can do for you would you mind getting out of here? This report's difficult enough without you standing over me like an avenging angel."

Spock walked over and glanced at the heading at the top of the page. "I understood that Crewman Khum died from injuries inflicted by a creature on the planet's surface."

"That's what killed him," McCoy said with certainty. "It poisoned every system in his body."

"Then I fail to understand your dilemma."

"Spock," McCoy gave him what was intended to be a grin of bitter encouragement, "you've got enough problems of your own."

Spock stared at him icily. "I have not yet been relieved of my duties, Doctor McCoy. I am still First Officer of this ship."

McCoy noticed with some satisfaction that the Vulcan's spine had stiffened and his chin lifted with the old haughty pride. For a brief moment the challenge to his authority had made him forget his deformed abdomen, and perhaps even the twisting of the parasites inside him.

McCoy lifted one leg over the corner of his desk. "All right," he said, introducing a note of reluctance into his tone. "Khum was an experienced man. This wasn't the first hostile environment he'd worked in, nor the worst, and I find it difficult to believe he'd have poked about in that undergrowth like that, knowing as he did the sort of creature likely to be there."

For a long moment Spock was silent, considering, and then he gave a slow nod. "You have a valid point, Doctor. The landing parties have been warned many times of the dangers of the survey. If you care to accompany me perhaps an examination of the creature and its habitat would prove informative."

"They caught the creature?"

"It was killed."

"Then I believe I'll come with you, Mr. Spock," McCoy said, and reached for his medical kit.

The planet by day was a pleasant place. The hillsides were green and the skies blue, and the golden sun beat warmly down on the men's backs. Whole communities of butterflies and bees were working busily among the feathery heathers and tiny birds with bright tufted ears whistled from the bushes. A soft breeze stirred the clumps of heavy yellowish grass heads, and in the places where the grass didn't

grow patches of blue and purple moss covered the ground. At the foot of the hills began the forest, and it went on endlessly to the horizon in a variegated green carpet.

From here McCoy could not see the clearing that was the native settlement, although he looked. Scattered along the hillside in isolated groups of three and four were the blue spots that were the shirts of the landing party, geologists and minerologists testing the underlying strata for the rare and valuable mineral/metal combination that was Sydium ore. Spock began to pick his way downhill towards the nearest group.

Most of the scientific talk was meaningless to McCoy. While Spock and the senior geologist studied the instrument readings he contented himself that at least for the moment the Vulcan had something to focus his attention on besides himself, and sat down on a flat-topped stone to enjoy the peace of a summer's day on a world more than a thousand light years from home - though in a way, McCoy reflected, this world was as much his home as any other. He lodged wherever the starship orbited. It was a long time since he had felt any real ties with Earth, with anyone except Joanna, and he doubted if she were still on that fair, blue-and-white world. The last letter he'd had she'd been on her way to the radiation research settlement on Mars, and that had been a long time ago.

Joanna, the only woman he had left to care for. He smiled slightly as he pictured her face. As a child she had worn pigtails, and her nose had been covered with freckles, but as she had grown older her hair had become smooth and silky and her skin golden, flawless. Through all the years her laugh had remained the same, soft, musical, teasing; he heard her laugh still, and he missed her companionship and her hand in his.

The gentle pleasure faded from McCoy's face to be replaced by a frown of concern as the face of another woman floated unbidden into his mind. It was the fur-covered face of Ilee. She too had a gentle, teasing laugh - and her hand had often slipped warmly into his as they sat beside her fire and talked long into the night. Among her people it was a sign of affection, and an invitation. Alien though she was she had a way with her that warmed the heart of a lonely and sometimes bitter man.

"Remain perfectly still, Dr. McCoy."

McCoy opened his eyes and realized he'd been dozing in the sunshine. Bounding away down the hill he saw the white backsides of the creatures nicknamed 'bunnies', despite the fact that they were a large, egg-laying rat, and bore little resemblance to the terrestrial rabbit. He was comfortable with his back against the hillside, and yet the voice had held a distinct warning note. McCoy turned his head and felt his flesh grow cold. From beneath the stone on which he sat had crawled a sizable black-shelled, red-legged insect which was now inspecting his outflung hand with its feelers. The sweat broke out on the doctor's skin.

"Perfectly still, Doctor," Spock said again.

McCoy became aware that the Vulcan was standing beside him and that he was making a fine adjustment to the output control of his phaser. Spock took careful aim and McCoy gritted his teeth and closed his eyes tightly as he fired. His flesh tingled as the backlash of dispersing energy sprayed over his hand and arm. When he looked again the insect was gone and where it had been was only a

patch of sick-looking grass.

Spock said nothing as the doctor scrambled to his feet. He merely re-attached the phaser to his belt and raised a meaningful eyebrow. Behind him Vernburg, the senior geologist, looked ill.

"Mr. Vernburg will show us the place where Crewman Khum was attacked," Spock announced, apparently forgetting the incident of the insect and certainly expecting no thanks for it.

McCoy swallowed hard to quieten his nerves. "Oh... fine," he managed.

Vernburg looked from McCoy to Spock and nodded, then set off down the hill with the two officers following close behind.

Apparently Khum had been a considerable distance inside the forest when the attack took place. There was a path, clearly defined and well trodden, that led down through a cool damp glade. In the warmth and light of the sun the forest appeared not at all the sinister, threatening place it became at night. The branches of the trees intermeshed overhead, but enough sunlight filtered through to cast dappled patches on the ground. Not much grass grew here, but in its place there was an abundance of moss in all shades of red, purple and blue. In the deeper shadows there were bottle plants with their bright orange lips wide apart, an open invitation for the unwary insect, and the air was filled with their sweet heady odour.

The trunks of the trees reached straight up into the forest canopy, and were mostly green in colour, although here and there one showed a crusty brown, and there was even a streak of silver-splattered red, the stem of a tufted 'cown' tree. Crowded together between and around the tree trunks were the compact shapes of the 'bucha', looking for all the world like closely woven green baskets upturned on the ground, and the broader-leaved 'kond' plants with their frilly white flowers and their red tendrils.

Of the beautiful glow-webs there was no sign. With the rise in temperature that accompanied each dawn they melted away, and their insect creators retired to the dampest, coldest spot available to await the coming of the noiseless dark.

Above all there were the *sounds* of the forest. There were rustlings and creepings and scuttlings in the undergrowth, and occasionally a bush shook as some larger animal pushed beneath it. There were birds singing or whistling from almost every tree, and sometimes the strident 'cak-cak-cak' call of one of the larger tree-living mammals rang out starkly.

Vernburg led the way, keeping rigidly to the path and making sure that he brushed against nothing in passing. At one point he stopped to point out a red and black patterned stone, the size and shape of a man's fist, strategically placed beside the path. He prodded it with a stick and Spock and McCoy were only a little short of amazed when a pincer-tipped armoured tentacle shot out from beneath it, snatched the stick and began to feed it methodically into concealed jaws.

Spock stepped forward with the clear intention of kicking the stone over. Vernburg laid a hand on his arm.

"With respect, sir, I wouldn't. It'd take your foot off - and eat it!"

The path divided into two, one leading down into a stream of sluggish yellow water, and the other crossing it on a bridge crudely shaped from a fallen tree and angling up again towards the rim of the glade. Here much of the vegetation was dead, and through the browned skeletons the thin shoots of a yellow night-flowering lily were reaching up towards the light.

"Over there, sir." Vernburg pointed to a place away from the path where the dead bushes had been beaten down.

Spock hesitated for a moment and then began to pick his way towards it. Scowling, McCoy followed, with the geologist making a reluctant third.

In the centre of the disorganized patch was a broken piece of branch the length of a man's arm. Wrapped around one end, still gripping tightly with suckered tentacles, was a creature that resembled more than anything else a brown and black speckled octopus with a spurred shell on its back. Half of the creature was missing, blasted away by a phaser beam, but there was enough left to estimate its size - about six feet from tentacle tip to tentacle tip - and to see that in each of its many suckers were embedded about a dozen tiny blue barbs. The creature was definitely dead; it was limp and deflated, but even in death its aspect was formidable.

"They like to live in these dead patches," Vernburg was saying. "Other times they go up in a tree and lie along the branches sunning themselves. They hunt at night, hanging their tentacles down over the path for anything that comes along."

Spock looked up at the overhanging branches with a trace of unease. "If the creature is dormant during the day, then it would not have attacked unless disturbed in its lair. Did Crewman Khum know specifically of its habitat?"

"Yes, sir. We all did. They're quite common. And besides, just about everything in these woods is lethal anyway. He must have been out of his mind to go poking about with that stick."

"That," remarked Spock, casting an eye in McCoy's direction, "seems to be the general opinion. I take it no-one actually witnessed the attack?"

"We heard him screaming and came running, but by the time we got here it was too late."

McCoy pushed at the broken branch with his foot and succeeded in turning the creature's shell over. Its underparts were soft and damp, and a light brown colour tinged with yellow.

Vernburg and Spock were already making their way back to the path. McCoy took a last look round and made an effort to catch the Vulcan up.

"Spock, there's something that isn't in the report. Just before he died Khum tried to tell me that he saw something - he didn't have time to say what."

Spock looked back towards the broken bushes, a frown on his face. "I fail to see what he could have seen to induce him to walk into such obvious danger."

McCoy sighed and shook his head. "I don't know," he muttered.

"I just don't know. But there's *something*..."

"Mr. Spock." Vernburg, who had gone ahead, had returned. "If you'll excuse me, sir, it looks like it's going to rain, and we shouldn't be caught in these woods in the wet."

"Very well, Mr. Vernburg," Spock agreed. "Please lead the way."

It was with relief that they at last emerged from the forest. True to their name, 'The Hills of the Raincloud' had interrupted the flow of moisture-laden air currents and were now shrouded heavily in cloud. The atmosphere had become oppressive and the forest was beginning to smell dank. With the sun obscured by the clouds the light was filtered and grey, and all the bright colours of the landscape had become dingy. The breeze that had blown with such caressing warmth now whipped the grass heads with chilly rain-laden gusts. Already the landing party had returned with their equipment to the starship, and the hillsides were bleak and abandoned.

As they made all possible haste to reach the beamdown point McCoy noticed that the Vulcan seemed very tired, so much so in fact that once he stumbled and almost fell. It would soon be time, the doctor decided, to place severe restrictions upon his activities.

By the time they reached the statutory point it was raining steadily, a fine acid drizzle that was at first pleasantly astringent to the skin. Prolonged exposure, however, made the skin sore and could damage the eyes.

"Three to beam up," Spock said into his communicator.

The three men shimmered briefly as they were lifted aloft to the starship. In the transporter room McCoy touched Spock's arm.

"You look tired. Why don't you let me give you that sedative so that you can get some rest?"

"Thank you, Doctor. Later, perhaps. I have duties to perform first."

"Well, all right." McCoy satisfied himself with that small concession. "I'll give you something to help you sleep when you come for your medication. Don't forget about that, now."

"I will not forget about it, Doctor."

McCoy didn't think for one minute that he would. "Spock," he said as they walked side by side in the direction of the turbolift, "why do you suppose Khum started thrashing about in that forest and got himself killed?"

"I do not suppose anything, Doctor McCoy. By using the available facts I try to assess all matters in a logical manner."

"Then assessing it logically, why do you suppose he got himself killed?"

Spock stopped at the intersection and looked at him with weary patience, his hands clasped behind him in the old familiar pose. In his present condition it didn't suit him at all, and tended to make him look pregnant. "In this case there are few facts on which to base any judgement. There was no apparent reason for him to have left the path, or to annoy the creature in its lair."

"But supposing he *didn't* annoy it? Supposing he *did* see something and left the path to take a close look, and that creature dropped onto him from one of those trees? He might have been trying to fight it off with that stick."

"The result is the same, Doctor. The man is dead."

McCoy sought desperately for the words he needed to express his unease. "He saw something - he was trying to tell me..." Spock raised an enquiring eyebrow and McCoy sighed helplessly. "I don't know what it was, but it was something important - desperately important. He wanted the captain to know..."

"What is important to a dying man often has little significance to the living."

"I know that as well as any man, Spock. But not this time. I feel it in my bones."

Spock merely looked at him for a moment and then turned and began to walk away. McCoy watched his retreating back and abruptly his mind did a quick somersault.

"There was something else!" he said with quick excitement.

Spock half turned and looked back over his shoulder. McCoy hurried to catch up.

"The native boy who died - what was his name? - Kiki? There was something odd about *that* as well."

"Odd?"

"Odd, yes! I didn't get time to examine the body thoroughly, but there was something..."

"Specifics, Doctor," Spock said icily. "One cannot base a logical assessment or a positive course of action upon the feelings in your bones."

McCoy gritted his teeth. "Damn you, Spock, I'll give you specifics! Just let me have five minutes alone with that body and I'll give you all the wretched specifics you need."

Very slightly, almost sadly, Spock shook his head. "By order of the captain the settlement and its immediate vicinity have been placed off limits to all ship's personnel, and that, Doctor, includes both you and me. You may not go there to inspect the body of the prince, nor for any other purpose whatsoever." And with that he turned on his heel and left a deflated and very angry McCoy to find his own way to sickbay.

Kirk recognised the knock on his door and looked up with an expectant smile. "Come in, Bones."

The door opened and McCoy came through it carrying two glasses in one hand and a slim bottle by the neck in the other. There was a grin on his face that corresponded with Kirk's, but even that could not hide certain lines of tiredness and worry on his face. He set the glasses down on the table and opened the bottle.

"That's the best medicine I know of," Kirk said as the doctor poured generous measures. "Sit down and tell me all your troubles, Doctor. You look as if you've got some."

"I've got a few," McCoy admitted and sat down heavily with his drink. "Spock's worrying me. He's pushing himself far too hard for a man in his condition, and he won't let up without official orders from you."

"I can make the order official any time you consider it essential. Do you want him relieved of duty?"

"I do. It's almost time to put him under constant observation in sickbay."

"Very well. You can consider it done. But he won't like it." Kirk put down his empty glass and reached for the bottle. "What else is on your mind?"

"I'm still thinking about that native boy, Jim. There was something about the way he died in that forest, and the way Khum died... But I can't put it into words. Specifics, as Spock would say, elude me. It's something I feel." He leaned forward across Kirk's desk. "Jim, if I could just get another close look at that boy's body..."

"I'm sorry, Bones." Kirk shook his head.

"It wouldn't take me ten minutes."

"I gave my word to the chief, Doctor. No-one goes down to that settlement."

McCoy sighed and sat back in his chair, turning his glass round and round in his hands.

"The good-will of this planet, and especially of this tribe, is of the utmost importance to the Federation," Kirk went on. "I want to leave that good-will intact for the next starship that comes this way."

"I understand, Jim." McCoy reached for the bottle and poured himself a refill. "If your word gets discredited, so does the rest of Starfleet."

"And that would leave the way wide open to the first Klingon ship that stopped by."

McCoy swallowed his drink and pulled an ugly face. "They're the last people we want on our back doorstep. Well, I've got to go and arrange for Spock's medication." He stood up and gathered the glasses and the bottle. "Sleep well, Jim. I'll see you in the morning."

"Good night, Bones."

It was more than an hour later that Kirk's paper work was again interrupted by the sound of the buzzer. "Come," he said.

The Vulcan entered carrying a report pad and a stylus. He walked with his head down, and in the shadows left by Kirk's table

light his face was all but invisible, but Kirk could tell from his attitude that he was under intense strain.

"Dr. McCoy told me that you'd agreed to take a pain killer and get a decent night's sleep."

Spock put the pad down on the desk and looked at it, reluctant to look Kirk in the face. "That is what I intend to do, sir. I have been checking the Starfleet flight plan registry for this sector."

"And?"

"No Federation vessel has requested or received authorization to enter this system."

"And it took you all this time just to find that out?"

"Apparently there was some confusion over a privately owned yacht which filed incorrect coordinate data. It took time to resolve it."

"I see. So if there's no Federation vessel in this sector then it must be a non-Federation vessel - and that means a Klingon ship?"

Spock nodded. "That is a distinct possibility, Captain."

Kirk paced back and forth across the room twice and then reached for the intercom switch. "Lieutenant, inform Starfleet that we believe we may have a Klingon intruder in this sector, and bring the ship to condition yellow alert."

"Yes, sir."

Kirk released the switch and looked kindly at Spock's face. "As for you, Mr. Spock, report to sickbay and get that medication. I think the time has come to relieve you of duty until you're fully fit again."

For a moment Spock was silent, looking at the floor. Then he raised his eyes to Kirk's face and the captain saw fully the ravages of pain and weariness in the bottomless depths of the dark eyes, and the hollow cheeks filled with shadows. He felt a tremendous pity for his friend, and resented it because he could do nothing to help.

"If there is a Klingon ship concealed in this system you will need a functioning First officer," Spock said quietly.

Kirk sat on the edge of his table. "Mr. Spock, normally I wouldn't have any other man at my side, but in the circumstances I'll have to manage without you. If there is trouble with the Klingons I'll be trying to worry about the ship and you at one and the same time. Neither of us would be able to do our job properly. I'm sure that Mr. Scott and Mr. Sulu will be able to take over your most essential duties between them."

Slowly Spock nodded. "Your decision is... most logical," he said, so softly that Kirk barely heard him, and turned towards the door.

"Don't forget the sleeping pill," Kirk said gently. "And I'm making that an order."

For a moment Spock hesitated, then went out. There was a new

stoop to his shoulders.

Christine Chapel did her very best to hide the sympathy she felt - she knew that the Vulcan she adored would not approve should he see it in her eyes - and yet she could not help the lump in her throat and the tears that gathered at the sight of him.

"Dr. McCoy left these for you, sir," she said, putting down on the table a glass of the unpleasant green milk and two small white tablets. "He said you were to go and lie down after taking them. I've prepared a bed for you."

Spock looked around the sickbay in mild surprise. "Where did the doctor go?" he asked.

Carefully Christine pretended not to hear. Spock swallowed half the liquid, suppressed a shudder, and looked at her curiously, still awaiting his answer. Christine busied herself tidying the desk and kept her eyes on her hands.

"Nurse, I asked you where Dr. McCoy went," Spock repeated pointedly.

There was no escape. Christine looked at him with a shadow of guilt in her eyes. "He said there was something he had to find out about, sir."

"And where did he go to conduct this apparently secret investigation?"

"He... beamed down to the planet's surface."

"To the native settlement." It was not a question.

Christine didn't answer. Spock swallowed down the last of the medicine and went out through the door with the speed of determination. It was only after he had gone that Christine realized he had left the sedative tablets untouched on the table.

McCoy materialized in the deepest shadows beneath the tree. The evening was beginning to grow late. But for three seated forms huddled close to the fire the clearing was deserted. The embers of the bonfire burned low and the dark damp forest crowded tightly upon the shadows. It was becoming bitterly cold, and McCoy shivered inside his insulated jacket and looked with some longing to where the night fires burned in the mouths of the caves. Inside the caves it would be warm and comfortable, and there would be soft laughter and pleasant conversation. His eyes picked out the cave of Ilee, a soft gentle creature different in form, highly desirable in nature.

Determinedly McCoy turned his thoughts from the comfort the woman could offer and ordered his mind to the matter at hand. After all, he warned himself sternly, he had no right to be here, and if Jim Kirk found out that he was, then Jim Kirk would be very angry indeed.

McCoy fixed his eyes on the leafy shelter that had been built for the lying-in-state of the dead prince. It would be several days yet before the final death rites and actual burial took place, and

during all that time vigil would be kept beside the fire. McCoy would have no better chance than this, under cover of darkness, but still the risks of discovery were great. He had pondered deeply on those risks in the last few hours, but a curiosity burned inside him with an insatiable fire - and colouring the flames like sprinkled salt were a whole range of emotions, premonitions and forebodings, none of which he could define and explain satisfactorily to himself, and certainly not to another.

With a nervous eye he plotted his course shadow by deep dark dappled shadow round the fringe of the clearing to the place where the forest grew closest to the bower. He assured himself that he was unobserved and cast a long lingering look towards the comfort of the caves. Carefully he left the shelter of the tree and moved through the shadows, keeping as close to the forest as he dared but letting not even the hem of his jacket brush against it, circling the clearing on silent feet.

There was a patch of bare starlit earth between the edge of the forest shadow and the shadow of the bower. There was only one way to cross it. McCoy straightened his back in an attempt not to appear furtive and walked boldly across. No-one seemed to see him. At the front of the bower the three natives sat undisturbed around their fire, dozing the cold hours away.

Using his hands in the dark McCoy examined the structure of the bower. It was made of branches leaning together in the pointed form of a tent and interwoven with vines cut from the forest. The vines had now dried and hardened to form a steel-like mesh binding the branches together.

At first McCoy thought he was defeated almost before he had begun. He could not walk out into the firelight and enter the bower by the front door, and neither could he force an entrance through the tangled vines and branches at the back. Then, almost as he was about to give up in despair, he found a weak spot down near the ground. By pulling and gently shaking the structure he enlarged the hole until it was just big enough for him to crawl through on hands and knees.

The body of the prince had been installed on a throne of branches and tied into a stiffly erect sitting position. At his feet were offerings of cooked fruits, and his eyes had been opened so that they stared out at the fire that burned in his honour.

To McCoy the night seemed suddenly to have become quiet, very quiet, as if all the eyes of the darkness were watching him and waiting to see what his next action might be before raising the alarm. He was forced to abandon his first idea of using the medical tricorder to make a fast and thorough examination - its warble would have betrayed him. Instead he had to rely upon the oldest instruments a doctor possessed, his finger tips. Fumbling and probing inaccurately in the dark he tried to repeat that first perfunctory inspection that had certified death. It was an awkward and unpleasant procedure, made no less difficult by the cramped conditions and the need for absolute quiet.

The flesh was stiff and the blood congealed, and the physiology of the alien was different from any he was acquainted with, but at last he found the spot, a place where there should have been solid bone but where there was only soft and spongy tissue. Probing gently with strong, all-seeing fingers, he turned his doubts into certainties.

McCoy withdrew carefully from the bower and did his best to close the hole behind him. He was not very successful. He considered it more important by far to carry his discovery aloft to the starship with the utmost possible speed. With a quick look around he darted towards the all-engulfing shadows of the forest.

Someone, somewhere, saw him - or saw something that gave cause for alarm. A startled shout went up and within seconds the clearing was in confusion as men raced from the nearest caves towards the circle of firelight, shouting to one another in their rapid chirrupy tongue.

McCoy withdrew into the deepest shadows as the alarm spread. Now was not the time to linger - but which way to go? Undecided, he hesitated.

The natives were growing quieter now as order was established. Some of them were carrying knives and hunting spears.

Afraid - not of them but of discovery and dangerous delay - McCoy took a desperate measure. He wrapped his jacket tightly about him and plunged into the forest.

At once the thick brooding silence and the cold wet air closed about him like a shroud. A hundred thousand pairs of eyes watched him and he felt the stare of each eye like the prick of a pin. He was determined not to panic, for in panic lay inevitable death. The first early glow-webs had been spun, draped from the trees like intricate Spanish lace, and their greenish light enabled him to see a little way ahead. Provided he touched nothing and chose each step with care he considered himself to be reasonably safe. None of the larger and more poisonous creatures would approach this close to habitation, and at night none of the natives would dare follow him.

As he progressed, footstep by painstakingly careful footstep, he left the excited sound of voices behind and the silence of the forest became absolute. The doctor began to feel very much alone. The shadows took on ominous darkened forms, and his imagination lent them threatening movement as he turned away. There were strange odours that assailed his senses. A pale-petalled flower turned its trumpet towards him and emitted a pleasant perfume. McCoy found concentration, even his determination wavering. He lost his sense of direction and found himself walking in a dazed condition towards the flower. He made himself stop and stand quite still while his inbuilt gyro re-established itself. The scientific and analytical part of his mind desired very much to explore the properties and potential of the odours, but his instincts warned him to beware of the confusion they created.

McCoy heard a sound behind him, and turned. Almost at once the noise came again, issuing from a small totally dark glade. It sounded exactly like someone kicking a pile of dead leaves, except that McCoy knew there were no dry leaves in this forest. He stared hard at the darkness between the trees, but there was nothing to be seen.

With all his senses straining he picked his way along a hardly discernible path. His intention was to reach the beamdown point, but in relation to his present position he was none too certain where that was. He was sorely afraid that after the confusion caused by the flower he had made a miscalculation that would take him a dangerously long way off course.

The dry leaf-like rustling came again, still to his left and still behind him, and only a little closer. McCoy developed the impression that something was following him, stalking him. He tried to keep one eye alert over his shoulder in case anything should come out of the darkness to attack his unprotected back, and at the same time tried to hasten his footsteps. The division of his attention was his undoing. An unwary step, a savagely thorned vine twisted about his ankle and McCoy pitched forward onto his face into a bed of moss. The soft earth muffled his yelp of pain and alarm as an anklet of fire burned round his leg. The large sharp thorns of the vine had torn through the leather of his boot and scratched his skin. Already a tingling sensation was spreading up his leg, followed by pain. Wide-eyed and panting with desperate fear McCoy sat up and unwrapped the vine, his fingers numb and fumbling. Released, it whipped back into the undergrowth like a loaded spring.

McCoy scrambled to his feet, only to collapse onto one knee again as his injured leg folded under him. The pain, an excruciating cramp, had almost reached his knee. He cast an anxious eye in the direction of the rustle. Two large bright amber eyes blinked at him. Despite his leg McCoy was on his feet in an instant and running for his life.

He broke from the trees in a loping hop, and it was a second before he realized where he was. He skidded to a panting halt. Somehow in the forest he'd got turned around, and was still a long way from the silver tree. He was much closer now to the hillside caves of the women. McCoy was interested now only in reaching the one place where he could hand over the responsibility he carried and obtain medical treatment for his leg. In the forefront of his mind was Khum's terrible death, and the thought that it could well be his own. He reached beneath his jacket and found to his dismay that his communicator was missing, lost somewhere behind him in the forest. He was out of touch with the starship and the potential assistance she harboured.

Bewildered, he stood for a moment staring down into the clearing where the excitement had now completely abated, then, scarcely thinking, he turned and began to climb upwards towards the caves. His leg was now utterly numb, as if flesh and bone had been replaced by a dead wooden stump. The band of pain had passed his knee and was beginning to creep fraction by fraction up his thigh. When it reached his body he feared that even amputation would be too late.

Dragging his leg he made his way along the line of caves, instinctively selecting the one where he knew there would be a welcome, the cave of Ilee. He hesitated in the entrance, his sluggish poisoned brain struggling to maintain him in an erect position. The fire still burned in the hollow, a red flickering light that brightened the first chamber of the cave but left the rest in complete darkness. The woman was not within that illuminated circle.

"Ilee!" he called in a voice that sobbed. There was a pounding agony growing in his temples that threatened to split his head in two. "Ilee!"

The woman appeared from the inner cave in time to see the doctor slump forward onto his knees. "Mac-Coy!" Alarmed, she rushed to his side. Her hand touched his burning face, her fingers tested the frantic pulse beat, her alert eye detected the muscular stiffness in his leg. "Mac-Coy, come!" she commanded, and with astounding strength lifted him onto his feet and force-marched him into the

inner cave.

For a moment she left him on a bed of moss and furs while she fetched a burning brand from the fire. In its light she straightened his limbs and carefully removed the torn boot. The scratches on McCoy's ankle were not deep, but the skin around them was swollen and bright red. Feverishly, McCoy's head rolled towards her.

"Ilee, take this!" He slipped the strap of the tricorder over his head and pushed it into her hands. "Hold it over the wound. Press this pressure pad here... and see... what number comes up on the screen. Match the number with one of these phials here." He indicated the medical kit on his belt. "And I'll have to have a stimulant. Hurry!" He gasped with pain and his eyes glazed over. "Hurry!" he moaned. "Match... match the numbers."

Ilee looked at the mysterious device in her hands and then at McCoy's white and sweating face, bewildered and trying to make sense of what he'd said, to determine what he'd meant by the strange word 'numbers', and what he intended her to do with the potions in the little crystal bottles. Was she to bathe the wound with them, or give them to him to drink - and what was a 'sedative'?

Almost in tears she shook her head and laid the strange black and silver box on the bed beside him. If Mac-Coy were to recover there were things she must do.

In clay pots she boiled two different types of herbs. One she mashed and plastered, boiling hot, on the inflamed wound; the other she strained carefully, sweetened the liquor with wild honey, and forced him to drink it down. Then for almost an hour she sat beside him and bathed his face with cool water.

Gradually the colour returned to McCoy's face. He came out of the coma and tossed feverishly for a few minutes, then he opened his eyes. His first sight was of her face bending close to his. She saw that he was awake and a smile lit her immense dark eyes. "Mac-Coy better now," she said with soft confidence.

McCoy eased his cramped limbs and found not only that feeling and function had returned to his leg, but there was also very little pain. There was a lingering soreness in his ankle and a slight headache behind his eyes, but the crippling agony was gone. He sat up and the torchlit cave spungiddily around him, but he remained determined to see his injury. He watched as Ilee peeled off the now cold poultice, and with it the poison drawn back through the wound. The scratches were still slightly inflamed, but the skin around them had returned to its normal colour and was now only a little tender to the touch.

McCoy checked his medical kit and found nothing missing, nothing used. Frowning, he picked up the tricorder. It contained no record of his injury. He looked up at Ilee.

"What did you use?" he asked. "I'm better, but I don't understand how."

"Ilee cure you," she said with a smile.

"But how?"

She shrugged and shook her head. "I cook leaves and I cure you. It is not hard. My mother showed me how a long time ago."

"Your mother showed you how," McCoy repeated, and because his head hurt he lay down again on the moss and sighed.

Ilee put her hand on his forehead and McCoy took her hand in his and brought it to where he could see it, small naked palm, four neat fingers and a thumb covered with soft red fur, like red velvet. McCoy stroked her hand and then her arm, the softness beneath his fingertips soothing him. The flickering of the torch hurt his eyes and worsened his headache. He closed his eyes against the light.

"Your mother must have been a very wonderful woman," he murmured drowsily.

In response she snuggled close to him and he felt her long legs stretch out on the bed beside him. For a moment he must have dozed.

"Most touching, Doctor McCoy, but it was very unwise of you to beam down in defiance of the captain's instructions."

At the first sound of the Vulcan's voice McCoy had started wide awake and by the time he had finished speaking the doctor was sitting up staring at him. Spock was leaning in the entrance to the inner cave with a look of careful non-disapproval on his face. To his credit he was not avoiding looking at what McCoy had to admit was a compromising situation. Ilee scrambled to her feet and scuttled away to the furthest, most shadowy corner of the cave.

"I didn't defy anyone!" McCoy snapped in irritation, and then corrected himself. "Well, yes, I did. But not for the reason you think, Spock. This isn't what it looks like... looked like..."

"I do not require your explanations, Doctor, although I am sure Captain Kirk will be most interested to hear them."

McCoy gritted his teeth. "Stop being a goddamned prig, Spock, and listen to me! I came down to take a look at that dead boy's body. His death wasn't an accident - he was murdered. When I saw Khum die I knew there was something wrong - the poison was all through his system. The boy was stung, but that was all. He was already dead, and his blood wasn't flowing to carry the poison round his body. His skull was smashed in from behind and he died instantly, *before* the creature attacked him."

"Indeed." Spock looked thoughtful. "I find your theory fascinating, Doctor, and it may have some basis in fact. However, this is not the time, nor the place, to expound it. The fires have already been extinguished and if you should be found in that bed the consequences could be most unfortunate."

Abruptly McCoy realised his predicament and tried to get up, too rapidly for his disorientated senses, and he collapsed again with a groan.

"Doctor McCoy!" Spock abandoned his nonchalant attitude and made his best speed to the doctor's side. "Doctor McCoy, are you ill?"

"Oh no!" McCoy gasped. "I just had a run-in with one of those man-eating vegetables. The leg, see?"

Spock looked at McCoy's ankle and dropped to his knees beside him, snatching up the tricorder. McCoy lay back and let him examine the scratches to his heart's content.

Spock looked up and found the native woman on her knees across the bed from him, watching him with expectant, over-large eyes. She held McCoy's hand in hers and in her eyes was a mixture of emotions that Spock noted in his own mind and stored for future analysis.

"I owe her my life, Spock," McCoy said wearily. "I was dying and she saved me. I would have died the way Khum died."

Spock silenced the tricorder. "You must go aboard immediately, Doctor. There is still some poison in your bloodstream. I would advise a complete transfusion."

"I'm the doctor, Spock," McCoy growled. "Ilee and I are the doctors." He squeezed the woman's hand and smiled at her.

Spock sighed and with difficulty got back onto his feet.

"You're the one who should be in sickbay," McCoy told him. "And why aren't you? Jim promised me..."

"We will both report for hospitalization, Doctor. If you give me your arm I will assist you..."

"Ilee!"

The exclamation was that of a newcomer. McCoy and Spock looked up to see a tall bearded young native in the cave entrance. There were shaved patches on his head and body to denote kinship with the dead prince, and beneath the bushy red-brown fur he was glaring at them angrily.

Ilee jumped to her feet and ran on tiptoe to stand before him, gesturing and speaking fluently to him in their own language. The young man's eyes blazed unwaveringly at McCoy.

Spock crouched down at the doctor's side. "Our situation has just become most difficult, Doctor," he said quietly. "Apparently he is the lady's betrothed, and he has found you in her bed. That means, in effect, that she has become your wife, and you her husband."

"But we didn't..."

"A technicality, Doctor. He is a nephew of the Chief. He feels he has been betrayed and he is claiming his traditional rights of revenge. She is trying to explain about your injuries and the necessity for immediate treatment."

"Let me know who wins," McCoy hissed.

"There would be no need for that," Spock said dryly. "His revenge would be your death - a quick and relatively painless end, I understand."

"Death? Spock, you've got to do something about it!"

Spock said nothing, but remained crouched at McCoy's side following the heated conversation with the smattering of language he'd picked up over the past week.

At last the young man made an impatient gesture and strode into the cave. McCoy cowered back as far as he could get. Spock made no move to protect him, rather he got up and moved away from McCoy's

side. The native knelt down in his place and made a none-too-gentle examination of the doctor's leg. He looked up with fresh anger in his eyes and barked a sharp sentence at Ilee. She seemed afraid and confused now, and she backed away from him. McCoy noticed that a new frown had appeared on the Vulcan's face, and wished that he too could understand what was being said. Two bright tears welled out of the woman's eyes and ran down on either side of her nose. They left two wet paths through her fur. She said something to the young man and raised her hands as if to fend off an expected blow to her face.

McCoy heard a solid 'Chump' as something hard struck flesh and bone. For a tiny fraction of a second he thought that the woman had been hit, and then he realized that he was wrong. Turning his head he was in time to see the Vulcan drop to his knees and fold slowly forward onto the floor. Behind him in the entrance to the cave stood two bearded, smiling, brown-skinned members of the Imperial Klingon Fleet, one of them still hefting the metal bar he'd used to fell the First Officer of the Enterprise.

Still smiling, the Klingons stepped carefully over the Vulcan into the cave. The taller, an officer by his uniform, looked from McCoy to Spock and back again.

"We are indeed fortunate," he remarked to his companion. "Two high-ranking Federal officers with one stone, so to speak. Our commander will be well pleased with our night's work."

With Spock's helpless body and the two unarmed natives under the threat of the Klingons' weapons, there was nothing McCoy could do but submit to having his phaser and tricorder taken from him.

The Klingon glanced at the medical kit and grinned. "You are invited aboard our vessel, Doctor. You had better assist your friend. He might find the transition uncomfortable alone."

McCoy glared at him, picked up his boot, and hobbled to the Vulcan's side. There was blood in his hair, making it slick and wet.

The Klingons were talking together in their own clipped gutturals, and as far as McCoy could tell they seemed to be discussing what to do with their native captives. The agreement, it seemed, was to take them also. They were pushed across the cave so that they were close to Spock and McCoy. The Klingon officer produced a communications device and spoke briefly to his ship. The six people in the cave pulsed with rainbow colours and vanished from the planet's surface.

The cell was a bare metal box. There was room for a man to walk ten comfortable paces in either direction, but there were no amenities or furnishings of any kind. One wall was replaced by a buzzing forcefield, and beyond this was an austere guard room.

Having secured their prisoners the Klingons had vanished, presumably to report, and McCoy found himself left alone with two bewildered natives and an unconscious Vulcan. For several minutes he stood with his nose inches from the forcefield and bellowed for attention, for water at least, and something to bathe the Vulcan's head with. No-one came, and gradually McCoy got the idea that that was the way things were going to be.

With a sigh he made his way back to where Spock lay on the

floor. There was little he could do for him. He straightened his arms and legs to avoid cramp and turned his head to one side in case he should vomit and choke. McCoy feared concussion and shock, and dared not think about the strength already lost to the parasites, but with his medical kit confiscated he was as helpless as a man with no arms.

He looked up at the two natives who huddled fearfully together in the corner, got up off his knees, and limped over to them. "Don't worry, it's going to be all right," he said reassuringly.

Ilee's vast eyes blinked at him. "Mac-Coy is not afraid," she said. "These are Mac-Coy's people?"

"No, they're not my people. But I'm not afraid."

She smiled and left the comforting arms of the native youth, holding out her hands to McCoy. "Then I am not afraid," she said.

McCoy took her hands and found that despite her words they were cold and trembling. He looked questioningly at the native. "You haven't introduced us," he said.

Ilee looked from one to the other. "This is Atek. When the spring rains come to swell the rivers, then we shall be wed."

McCoy frowned. There was an expression in the woman's eyes when she looked at him that was both caring and tender, but when she looked at this native man there was a softness that spilled over from her eyes and filled her whole face. It was a difference in emotional quality that gave McCoy food for thought.

Bleary-eyed and unshaven, Kirk stepped from the turbolift onto the bridge. He glanced towards the computer station, remembered that Spock was by now fast asleep in sickbay, and went down to the command seat.

"What's this about sensor readings, Sulu?" he inquired.

The helmsman's angled eyes were fixed immovably on the viewing screen. "An energy trail, Captain. We picked it up just a few minutes ago. It looks like residue from an impulse driven system."

"But not a Federation ship?"

"No, sir."

Kirk sat down in the command chair. "Where did he go, Mr. Sulu?"

"Unknown, Captain. There's a large amount of debris in this system. He could be hiding amongst it."

Kirk pulled at his bottom lip with his teeth and then touched the intercom button under his hand. "Chief Engineer Scott, report to the bridge, please," he ordered. "Mr. Sulu, keep a tab on that energy trail. I don't want to lose it."

Scott arrived on the bridge looking as fresh and dapper as if he'd just stepped out of the ablutions hall. Beside him Kirk felt positively grimy.

"Scotty, I want you to do some computer work for me."

"Aye, sir." Scott made his way round the balcony to the computer station and Kirk joined him there.

"I want the two residue trails discovered by Mr. Spock and Mr. Sulu plotted onto a graph of the system, and then a possible orbit computed for a theoretical ship that might have left those trails."

"It'll take me a minute, sir." Scott sat down at the computer and started to make complex manoeuvres among the controls. Kirk turned and leaned his bottom against the console and looked at the screen.

The segment of planet that had been so much a part of the bridge scenery for so many days vanished, to be replaced by a line-and-symbol elevation map of the system. Inch by inch Scott plotted the residue trails across the map. The first was broad and pale pink because of the wide dispersion of the particles; the second was clear and distinct and bright red, a very new trail.

Kirk frowned at it. "That doesn't look much like an orbit, Mr. Scott."

Scott glanced up with a knowing twinkle in his eyes. "Let me work on it, Captain."

Kirk nodded and behind him the computer chattered; gradually on the screen a pattern of neat intersecting curves took shape.

"Aye, he's a clever one, all right!" Scott said with an appreciative shake of the head. "Basically a highly eccentric ellipse, but he alters course three times every time he goes round, an' that mean he spends most o' his time hidin' out in that asteroid belt where our sensors couldn't tell him from a space-born hunk of Ben Nevis."

"I see it, Scotty. And that orbit also means he doesn't come near the planet very often - and when he does he can time it so that he's on the far side and in our sensor shadow."

"That's about it, sir."

Kirk walked forward and stood below the screen, looking up. It was clever, very clever indeed. And just the sort of thing a Klingon might think of.

Kirk turned with a wicked smile. "Very well, gentlemen. If they want to play hide-and-seek we don't want to disappoint them, do we? Mr. Sulu, prepare to leave orbit. Mr. Scott, plot us an interception course. When that ship comes out of the asteroid belt I want to be there waiting for him."

With gleeful smiles the reponse came back. "Aye aye, sir!"

Heavy boots pounded across the guardroom floor. McCoy looked up to see a whole assembly of Klingons gazing at him through the force field. The doctor got slowly to his feet and hobbled forward until he stood a yard from the invisible, buzzing barrier. He folded his arms and returned their stares icily.

The Klingon commander was a not unhandsome man of about McCoy's own age. There were traces of grey at his temples and a rare silver streak in his beard. He looked at McCoy with calm confident eyes that also held just a trace of amusement, then looked beyond McCoy at the barely conscious Vulcan. He dismissed the natives with a glance.

"It is indeed unfortunate that we have happened upon you at such an inopportune moment, Doctor. I'm sure that you, and in particular the Vulcan, would have a great deal to tell us about the innermost conspiracies of the Federation."

"We wouldn't tell you anything - about anything," McCoy said softly.

The Klingon merely smiled. "We have ways and means that would have your stalwart friend in tears in a matter of hours. But that is an academic matter. As was inevitable the Enterprise has at last detected our presence and is already moving to intercept us. It is only a matter of time before Captain Kirk accurately determines the whereabouts of his doctor and First Officer, even if he has not done so already. Naturally, I cannot afford to keep you aboard, much as I would savour your company."

"Then I suggest you kill us and get it over with!" McCoy snapped.

"I don't intend to *kill* you, Doctor. If Captain Kirk should discover your murdered bodies, he would not look kindly upon us."

McCoy's fists clenched. "Then if you're not going to cut our throats you'd better let us go! Now! The cut on this man's head needs attention, and he needs regular medication for his condition."

"Ah yes." The Klingon's eyes lingered on the Vulcan's ungainly shape. "The Vulcan has been to Tavas, I see."

"He caught the worm from an infected food dispenser on a backwater supply base."

"How unfortunate." The Klingon managed to look genuinely unhappy. "However, he need not worry about a further infection."

McCoy drew a long deep breath. "You said you would let us go."

"I said no such thing, Doctor. I said merely that I could not afford to kill you. However, your deaths have been arranged. We have taken evasive action and by the time we do engage the Enterprise there will be no sign that any of you have been aboard. A necessary precaution I'm sure you will appreciate. You have fifteen minutes, and then we will be in a position to beam you to the planet's surface. A suitable spot has been selected. There will be no escape, and if your remains should ever be found... it will look like an unfortunate accident. A devoted doctor caring for his patient to the last, and two poor savages who just happened to be lost in the forest after dark."

McCoy looked towards the two huddled natives. "Yes, you'd have to get rid of them too," he said heavily. "You can't afford witnesses."

"Quite so, Doctor." The Klingon commander smiled his approval and his satisfaction. "With you both dead we estimate that the efficiency of the Enterprise will be reduced by some 68% for a period

of seven months. Longer, if the Vulcan is replaced by a man of lesser efficiency. A worthwhile bonus to our activities here. You don't have very long, Doctor - I suggest you make your preparations for death." He inclined his head, and followed by his entourage of officers he left the prisoners alone to consider their fate.

Angrily McCoy turned, and was startled when Ilee hurled herself into his arms. "Oh Mac-Coy!" she sobbed. "I am so afraid! He does mean us to die! He does!"

"Now..." McCoy held her away from him. "We're not dead yet, and we're not going to die. We'll find a way out of this."

The native youth Atek stepped past him, his chest swelling with fury. "I see a way out!" he said stiffly. "Their flashing lights do not frighten me."

McCoy released Ilee and spun round to grab him in the nick of time. The forcefield flared angrily as McCoy pulled him away.

"You can't go through there. It's a forcefield. Don't you understand? A forcefield. It'd fry you alive!"

The native stared at him with uncomprehending eyes, but the blaze of energy in the entrance had proved sufficient discouragement. He wouldn't try to break through again.

McCoy left him and went to the Vulcan. The fact that Spock had made no attempt to get on his feet concerned the doctor greatly. Vulcans never took illness or injury lying down, and were notorious for fighting for their feet unless in extremity. He didn't let the worry show on his face.

"You heard what he said?"

Spock nodded. "I heard, Doctor."

"Have you any bright Vulcan ideas about how to get us out of this?"

Spock closed his eyes. "As of this moment, none, Doctor."

McCoy's face softened. "Are you in very much pain?"

Spock's lips tightened and, just once, he nodded.

Scott frowned into the blue light of the sensor screen. "There's no doubt about it, sir. He's out-thought us and turned away."

"Where is he, Scotty?" Kirk asked from the command seat.

"He's making a vector directly for the planet. An' Captain... I have a configuration reading on the alien. It's a Klingon all right, an' a big one!"

Kirk nodded. "Very well, Mr. Scott. I want a parallel course with the Klingon vessel, Mr. Sulu. Stay with him every move he makes. Lt. Uhura, inform Starfleet Command that the intruder has been positively identified as a Klingon, probably of Starship class, and request instructional guidance."

"Aye aye, sir."

"He's just passed into the planet's sensor shadow, Captain," Sulu reported. "We'll be in a position to match orbits with him as soon as he emerges."

"Very good." Kirk settled back into the command seat. "Lt. Uhura, open hailing frequencies. I want to talk to that Klingon."

Hardly daring to draw breath McCoy stared round at the malignant watchful forest. They had been fortunate - if it could be called that - that they had materialised in a small clearing that was not immediately lethal. McCoy wondered momentarily if that was by chance or by some savagely cruel ambition of the Klingon. No doubt it would give him great satisfaction to think of them wandering in the dark while death sought them out.

In any event it was the end - their end. It was very late and very cold, and the condensation dripped from the trees into the wet undergrowth below with noisy ploppings and rustlings. Stripped of his protective jacket McCoy found his uniform shirt soaked through in minutes, and his skin icy cold to the touch.

The natives huddled together in an embrace of fear; native to the planet, alien to the night-shrouded forest, they seemed helpless and pathetic, but perhaps they knew better than the starship officers the multitude of painful deaths the forest could offer.

Spock alone was showing any improvement in his condition. He was sitting up now with his legs tucked under him in the Vulcan manner, and his eyes had brightened, although whether with fever or coherence McCoy was uncertain. The Klingons had been none too gentle handling him into the transporter. McCoy squatted down beside him.

"What are we going to do now?" he asked in a subdued tone.

Spock looked from him to the natives and then beyond them to the forest. "The logical thing to do would be to make our way to the native settlement and impose upon the chief for the use of his communicator."

"But that's impossible, Spock! We don't even know whereabouts we are in this forsaken forest. And even if we knew which way to go, we wouldn't get half a mile before we were all bitten, stung or otherwise poisoned to death."

"Probably true. However, that is a risk we have no alternative but to accept." Spock looked up through the break in the forest canopy and studied the bright ribbon of stars that split the sky in two. "As it happens, I have made a study of the constellations from this hemisphere. It should be possible to steer an approximate course by the stars."

"An *approximate* course! It's a shot in the dark, Spock. And you know it. We don't stand a chance in hell of walking out of these woods."

Spock shot a glance at the quivering natives and frowned warningly at McCoy. The doctor understood.

"Wouldn't it be better just to stay here until daylight?" he

hissed. "Jim's bound to start looking for us before long."

"Impractical, Doctor. Look about us."

McCoy looked, and saw that the four of them were no longer alone. Two pairs of bright orange eyes gleamed at them out of the forest.

"Our presence here will attract the denizens of the forest," Spock said. "The longer we remain the more of them there will be."

McCoy gazed at him anxiously. "Can you travel?"

In response Spock got his feet under him and laboriously stood up.

McCoy turned to the natives. "We're going to find our way out of here," he said. "All of us. Now."

They cowered away from him, their eyes dark wells of fear. McCoy bent down, took Ilee by the arm and pulled her to her feet.

"Trust me, Ilee," he said softly. "Trust me and I'll take you out of here. I promise."

Over the woman's shoulder he caught sight of the native man's face. He was frowning, but nodded gravely. He understood. He put a hand on Ilee's arm.

"If Mac-Coy says we go, then we will go," he said quietly.

Gingerly Spock picked up a broken length of branch and weighed it in his hand, assessing its potential as a weapon. He looked at McCoy and took a final sighting on the stars, then set off into the depths of the forest.

It was not totally dark. The path the Vulcan chose led down through an avenue of trees draped with the wonderous structures of the glow-webs. The tiny creatures had been hard at work and the intricate laceries were almost complete. They hung low from the branches and their cold green light illuminated the path.

The pathway itself was an animal track, and a well-used one, for it was swept clean of forest debris by the constant passage of large bodies. Following Spock's example they moved silently on the balls of their feet, crouching low to avoid brushing against the glow webs. Of all the things in the forest they were the most harmless, but the plump-bodied insects that wove them and waited in hiding for the fruits of the night air could move remarkably quickly on their hundreds of silver-thread legs, and they had a sting that resembled a mild electric shock.

The path was long and almost straight, but eventually it ended, as all things must, and with it ended the comfort of the green glow-web light. The forest floor sloped sharply downwards into darkness, and although other ways appeared easier Spock, with typical Vulcan stubbornness, was determined to hold his course. He cast a glance over his shoulder to check that McCoy and the natives were close behind him and began to climb carefully down. McCoy cursed the Vulcan soundly and took Ilee's hand to help her down. Atek held her other hand and all four moved into the restless darkness.

And 'restless' was the correct descriptive term. The

undergrowth and the trees overhead were alive with rustlings and cracklings. At one point Spock stopped dead and held up a hand. Despite a precarious position McCoy froze. Looking over the Vulcan's shoulder he saw something dark and covered with luminous orange spots slide out from almost directly beneath the Vulcan's boots and slither silently away. McCoy heard Spock's release of breath and saw him relax. His shoulders slumped.

"Are you all right?" McCoy whispered.

Spock turned his head and McCoy saw the glint in his eye. Spock was far from all right, but he was on his feet and was determined to stay there. His Vulcan blood was at last fighting back.

The slope became steeper, until the only way to go down it was by sliding on thighs or backsides. Spock pushed the pace hard, until Ilee was gasping for breath and both McCoy and the native were panting, but it was far from a reckless dash. Although he was driving his own pain-racked body beyond its limits Spock knew the exertion and the tension of fear were keeping the cold from their limbs and their minds active.

The hillside became the banks of a stream that was little more than a ditch filled with thick yellow water, black in the darkness and sickly green in the light of a single overhanging glow-web. Here Spock stopped and allowed the others to catch up with him.

McCoy looked at a scratch on Ilee's leg and reassured her that it was not toxic. He hoped fervently that he was right.

"Well, which way do we go now?" he asked, moving closer to the Vulcan.

"That way. We follow the stream. It should be safer and easier for the woman."

McCoy looked at the dark tunnel of trees through which the stream ran. It looked singularly uninviting, but he had to admit that there was no other way to go. "You'll have to give her a chance to rest before you attempt it."

"I intend to let us all rest, Dr. McCoy."

McCoy inspected the ground carefully before sitting down on it, pulled up his trouser leg and began to massage the lingering ache out of his calf muscle. "How long do you think it'll be before Jim does find us?"

Spock stared at the sluggishly moving water. "I would not rely too greatly upon an immediate rescue attempt, Doctor. If the captain has engaged the Klingons it is reasonable to assume he has other things on his mind."

"He must have realized we're not aboard."

"Not unless he has required your services. I have been relieved of duty."

McCoy opened his mouth then closed it again. There was nothing relevant left to be said. He went on rubbing his leg as he watched the Vulcan pick his way a short distance along the bank, stepping carefully over the tree roots and inspecting the overhanging branches. The doctor noticed with a detached medical eye that his

legs were stiffening about the knees, and that was another sign he didn't like.

Spock turned back, frowning, and McCoy saw a strange look come into his eyes. It was a look of absolute horror - and the Vulcan was staring straight at McCoy.

The doctor scowled at him and began to get up. From the branches above his head a silver curtain of slime dropped down over him. McCoy found himself choking, unable to breathe. His head and the whole of the upper part of his body were engulfed in a thick sticky membrane, and muscular ligatures within the membrane were beginning to contract.

Distantly McCoy heard the woman scream. He dropped to his knees, clawing at his face in an attempt to free his eyes and mouth. The membrane was tightening around his throat. His head began to spin and there was the ever-increasing sound of rushing water in his ears. Red spots flared in front of his eyes and he felt himself falling forward.

He felt a blow, muted by the thickness of the creature's body, and almost at once the constricting muscles began to relax. The membrane loosened and anxious hands began to tear at it. On his back in the wet earth he opened his eyes and looked up into Spock's face.

"Doctor, are you all right?"

The best McCoy could do was cling to his arm and nod. Spock helped him sit up and he gazed at the creature that lay beside him in the mud. Its body had been small and globular and soft; the blow from Spock's branch had smashed it. The silver membrane was draped between eight boneless tentacles like the skin between the fingers of a bat. Already it was beginning to wither.

McCoy found himself shivering but he couldn't decide if it was because of the cold or with fear. He looked at Spock with pleading eyes. "Let's get out of here, Spock!"

Spock looked at him shrewdly and nodded, then helped him onto his feet. "It's impossible for us to proceed along the bank. The trees grow right down into the water."

McCoy stared at him. "But we can't just sit here and... and let this forest eat us alive!"

"Indeed we cannot. The Klingon intended us to die. I have no intention of obliging him."

"Then how...?" McCoy broke off as Spock turned away from him and took a determined if slow step towards the stream. He guessed the Vulcan's intention. "Spock, you can't! It won't work. We'll all be killed."

Spock ignored him and stepped down into the icy water. It swirled thickly halfway up his calves and slopped into the tops of his boots. His animal instincts recoiled and for a moment he hesitated, then his strength of will regained control. His face was set as he turned, and McCoy sighed his resignation.

In a carefully matched and precisely calculated orbit the two starships swung away from the planet and vectored for the system's

asteroid belt.

Jim Kirk sat stiffly in the command seat and stared gravely at the nut-brown and rather surprised face of the Klingon on the central viewing screen.

"What I want to know," said Kirk "is exactly what you're doing in this system."

The Klingon smiled a thin Klingon smile that betrayed the whiteness of his teeth. "I don't see that you have any authority to demand an answer to that question, Captain Kirk. I was under the impression that this was a free sector - or does the Federation now presume to claim the entire galaxy?"

Kirk ground his teeth together. "The Federal frontier has been expanding in this direction for the past decade, and your superiors are well aware of that fact."

"With your greedy Human eyes on the rich star fields beyond the desert, no doubt!" The Klingon disarmed his words with a wider smile that allowed Kirk to see the points of his incisor teeth.

"What are you doing here that you're so furtive about?" Kirk repeated tensely.

"Furtive, Captain?"

"You've deliberately pursued an orbit that concealed your ship from our sensors. You've failed to contact us in any way. It's usually considered common courtesy to reveal your presence."

"We're hardly on terms for courtesy calls, now are we?" the Klingon smiled. "As for our orbit, eccentric, I'll agree, but purely for scientific purposes. That's why we're here, Captain. Science, pure and simple. A survey commissioned by the Imperial Klingon Command."

"I don't believe you," Kirk said evenly. "In fact, I strongly *dis*believe you. You know there are workable Sydium deposits on that planet, and it's your intention to subjugate the people and take the metal for yourselves."

The Klingon's smile died. "A serious accusation, Captain, and a totally unwarranted one which you may have reason to regret."

"Then I shall regret my next action even more deeply," Kirk told him. "I ask you to bear in mind the fact that we're closer to Federal space than we are to the Klingon Empire, and to stand by to be boarded."

The Klingon's face tightened. "You have no authority..."

"I have a Federation starship and the Federal fleet could be here before your request for assistance reached home. Of course, if you care to fight it out here and now..."

"No, Captain." The Klingon relaxed and his smile returned, if a trifle strained. "We have nothing to fight over. I invite you to visit my ship. You will be made most welcome."

"Expect us in exactly ten minutes," Kirk said shortly and broke off communication. "Mr. Scott!" He swung himself out of the command

seat. "I want a fully armed security detail ready in the transporter room in precisely eight minutes. I'm going to take that Klingon apart."

"Aye aye, sir," Scott said, frowning.

Kirk went up the steps to the turbolift and was met by Christine Chapel as she emerged. The woman had obviously been crying - her eyes were reddened and one cheek was still damp. Kirk looked at her in surprise.

"Nurse Chapel, whatever's upset you like this?"

"Oh, Captain!" Chapel stifled a sob and wrung her hands together. "It's Dr. McCoy. He beamed down to the planet hours ago. Mr. Spock went after him - and neither of them have come back!"

For a brief second Kirk just stared at her, and then he turned to Uhura. "Lieutenant..."

The hands of the communications officer were already busy. "Enterprise to Mr. Spock... Come in, please. Enterprise to Dr. McCoy..." She listened for a long moment and then shook her head. "They don't respond, sir."

"Keep trying."

"Captain." Scott stepped forward anxiously. "Do you think those Klingons could be holdin' them in that tin bucket o' theirs? Smilin' Boy would regard two starship officers as a valuable prize to take home for pig stickin'."

Kirk thought for a moment, his eyes dark with trouble. "No, Scotty. They gave in too easily. If they'd had Spock and McCoy aboard they'd have run, or made a fight of it. They put up just a token resistance... as if they knew they were clean and they wanted me to know it as well." He prowled the bridge restlessly, back and forth while his mind raced. "If they've been dropping and picking up personnel on each close approach to the planet they could have conducted their own Sydium survey - and if they have, their results will be stored away in their computer system."

"Aye, sir," Scott agreed. "An' Mr. Spock's our computer expert."

"The man best qualified to extract the evidence of what they've been up to." Kirk stared at the engineer. "They must have known Spock was unavailable, and if they knew that and yet he's not aboard their ship... then he must be somewhere on that planet. Lieutenant Uhura...?"

"Nothing, sir. They don't answer."

"Belay that security detail, Mr. Scott," Kirk ordered. "Mr. Sulu, break us out of this crazy orbit and get us back to that planet - at the double!"

Knee deep, sometimes thigh deep in the numbing water of the stream, Spock, McCoy and the two natives had exhausted the last dregs of their strength. Many times one or the other of them had stumbled on a submerged stone or tree root and fallen, often dragging the others down with him. They were wet and insensitive with cold, and infinitely tired. Ilee clung in turn to Atek and McCoy, and most of

the time she was sobbing.

With only a small part of his mind still functioning Spock led the way to the bank and somehow clambered out of the water and onto the slippery mud shelf. Gasping and clinging to a tree root he offered his hand back and one by one McCoy and the natives hauled themselves out of the water and collapsed. For a long time they lay in the grey filtered starlight and panted, their limbs aching with the cold, and the sweat of their bodies ran like liquid fire on their skins. In each the level of the life force ran very low.

Gradually, over a long period, the steady drip of the forest moisture impinged itself on their consciousness. Painfully McCoy eased himself into a half sitting position. On one side of him the natives lay wrapped in each others arms for warmth and comfort; on the other Spock lay on his back breathing shallowly, his face a pale death mask. McCoy sought a pulse and found one, a weak rapid beat. He picked up one of the Vulcan's hands and rubbed it vigorously, and after a moment Spock drew a deeper breath, opened his eyes, and looked at him.

"You take it easy for a minute," McCoy advised. "All you need is a rest."

Spock rolled his head in the mud. "Too far..." he murmured. "Too far..."

"It was a good try." McCoy tried a grin of reassurance and hoped it came off. "It'll be dawn in a couple of hours. You'll be stronger then, and..."

"Mac-Coy!" Ilee's shout was a cry of alarm. The doctor spun round, standing up as he did so, and saw that Atek was already on his feet and squaring up to a large porcupine-type beast that had emerged from the forest.

McCoy snatched up the branch from where it lay beside Spock's hand, but it was already too late. The creature charged with its head down and its dark white-tipped spines bristling. With his body shielding Ilee there was nothing Atek could do but stand his ground. The creature's spines pierced his thigh and with a cry of pain he collapsed into the mud. McCoy threw the branch and caught the creature a lucky blow on the head. Rattling its spines angrily it withdrew into the undergrowth.

McCoy dropped to his knees at the native's side. There were a multitude of puncture wounds in his leg, neat round holes that did not bleed. Ilee nursed his head in her lap and cried over him softly while McCoy knelt beside them feeling utterly helpless. Already Atek was having difficulty with his breathing.

Painfully Spock dragged himself over to join them. "Doctor?"

McCoy sighed. "That monstrosity injected some sort of respiratory paralysar. He's dying, and there's nothing I can do."

Ilee broke into a fresh flood of tears. "Atek not die!" she wept, her furry face becoming wet once more. "Not die! Mac-Coy save!"

The doctor stared at her. "I can't!"

Spock lifted each of the native's eyelids in turn. "Doctor, his

heartbeat and other bodily functions seem to be relatively unaffected. If we could maintain his respiration until the paralytic spasm is over, he may survive."

McCoy felt for Atek's pulse. "That's a remote possibility, Spock, but it's worth trying." He positioned himself beside the native's head, pinched the man's nostrils tightly together, and with a deep breath applied his mouth to the patient's.

And so began a seemingly endless period of conflict between the knowledge and ability of modern man and a complex poison of nature. Spock and McCoy took it in turns to share the strength of their lungs with the native. As time went by it became more difficult. The crisis point came when Atek's lungs became totally paralysed. The muscular tissue around them became stiffer and they actually resisted inflation. The native's hands knotted into tight balls and his feet contracted until his toes almost touched his heels.

Stubbornly the starship officers persisted, Spock forcing his breath into the native's mouth and McCoy leaning rhythmically on his chest to expel each breath. At last the poison released its deadly hold and the cramped muscles began to relax. Weakly at first, but with increasing strength, Atek began to breathe on his own once more. Ilee nursed his head and smoothed his brow with her fingers, and made gentle mewling noises to him.

Somewhere in the undergrowth the porcupine creature rattled its spines warningly. McCoy looked at Spock.

"We'll have to find some sort of shelter. We can't stay here in the open and none of us can walk any further."

Spock nodded and looked around. His eyes fell upon a deep shadow in a place where the bank of the stream became steep and high. With a clenched hand pressed tightly against the pain in his abdomen he got up and went to investigate. Half hidden behind a dense scrubby bush he discovered a hole in the bank. The stream had washed out the soil from beneath the arched roots of a tree to leave a damp cave. McCoy joined him and peered into the darkness. No bright eyes gleamed back at him. The cave was empty.

With Ilee's assistance they manoeuvred Atek into the comparative security of the cave. It was very wet and dark, but a little warmer than the bitter night outside. Within minutes Ilee had curled up in a fitful sleep. McCoy was left alone to watch over his patients.

Spock had collapsed onto the muddy ground and lay sprawled on his back. Looking at him, McCoy noticed that the Vulcan's shape had altered significantly. The prominent abdomen had receded, and McCoy knew from past experience what that indicated; the parasites had moved into the lower regions of the Vulcan's bowel prior to expulsion. The senior officer of the Enterprise was about to require immediate and expert attention. It was a proposition McCoy did not relish in the damp and the dark, but there was no alternative. With business-like determination McCoy rolled his sleeves up to his elbows.

"Captain Kirk." Uhura looked round from the communications console. "A subspace message from Starfleet Command. They acknowledge our signal and give you a free hand to deal with the Klingon as circumstances demand."

"Deal with him?" Kirk rammed his fist into the palm of his hand. "Right now I'd like to blast him clear out of the galaxy!"

"Captain!" Scott said sharply from the computer sensor.

Kirk directed a finger at Uhura, "Acknowledge that!" and made his way across the bridge. "What is it, Scotty?"

"I think I've found them, sir. Four humanoid life forms where no humanoids ought to be, right in the middle of that forest."

Kirk stared at him, his jaw tight. "Get down there, Scotty. Get them aboard. Do what you can."

"Aye, sir!" Scott left the bridge at a run, and Kirk returned to the command seat.

"Mr. Sulu, do we still have a sensor trace on that Klingon?"

"Aye, sir. He's still in that asteroid belt, but he's altered his orbit to avoid the planet."

"The chances are he's preparing to head for home," Kirk said. "Mr. Sulu, as soon as we've finished beaming set a course for the Klingon's position. I want to intercept him."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Lt. Uhura," Kirk went up the steps, "I'll be in sickbay."

McCoy poured himself a generous drink and threw it back in a single gulp. He'd needed it so badly that he scarcely shuddered. The door opened and the doctor looked up as Kirk came through. "Have a drink," he invited, tipping more liquor into his glass. His hand shook, and some slopped onto the table.

"Bones?" Kirk looked at him anxiously. "Are you all right?"

"Sure I'm all right." McCoy swallowed half the drink. "I'm just what they used to call a little punch drunk. Battle happy. I intend to get properly drunk, and then I'll be just fine."

"What about Spock?"

"Seventeen parasitic worms lighter than he was a couple of hours ago." McCoy sat down heavily and rubbed his hands over his face. "As far as I could see none of them were fully mature. I don't think he'll be re-infected."

Concerned, Kirk looked towards the ward where the medical team were making Spock and Atek comfortable in clean beds. "Now - how did you get to be in the middle of that forest?" Kirk asked slowly.

McCoy gave a sour grin. "A certain Klingon gentleman thought it would be an ideal opportunity to rid the Enterprise of 68% efficiency for a period of seven months."

"That's about what I thought," Kirk said and headed for the door.

"Jim!" McCoy called him back. "Don't tell Spock he had his star maps upside down and was leading us in the wrong direction." He

raised his glass and grinned wickedly. "I want to tell him."

Kirk smiled and nodded, and the door closed behind him.

Kirk sat straight and relaxed in the command seat, his narrowed eyes fixed on the screen as the Enterprise picked her way cautiously through the asteroid belt.

"Closing with the Klingon," Sulu reported from the helm. "Dead ahead, range sixteen hundred kilometers."

Kirk's eyes picked out the metallic glint among the drifting space rubble. He looked over his shoulder. "Open hailing frequencies, Lieutenant."

"Hailing frequencies open, sir."

The screen cleared and the Klingon's face appeared. His surprise was quickly replaced by the eternal all-masking smile.

"Captain Kirk! Hardly a pleasant surprise. We thought you had changed your mind and decided to decline our invitation."

"I suddenly discovered I had pressing business elsewhere," Kirk said without expression. "My ship's doctor informs me that he and my First Officer have already savoured your... hospitality."

Kirk found the play of emotions across the Klingon's face fascinating to behold.

The Klingon Commander realized too late that he was undone. It was too late to run and too late to fight. Instinct alone controlled his reactions as he stared at the fury on the face of this Federation captain - the Klingon instinct for conflict. He snapped out an order and with a sweep of the hand cut the communication link with the Enterprise.

"He's coming about, sir," Sulu reported. "Squaring up at us."

"Prepare to put a shot across his bow, Mr. Sulu."

"Phasers locked on, sir."

"Fire number one phaser."

Sulu's hands moved swiftly across the board and Enterprise spat a thin straight beam of electric blue energy. Sulu leaned across to peer into the helm sensor.

"He's still turning, sir."

"Fire number two phaser."

Again the light dimmed momentarily and the brief scream of released energy sang through the superstructure. Kirk sucked his knuckles and waited.

"It's no good, Captain," Sulu said. "He's going to fire."

"Deflector screens!" Kirk ordered. "Mr. Scott, lock phasers on target for a direct attack."

"Aye, sir."

"The Klingons are firing, sir."

The beams of alien energy dispersed with fiery phosphorescence against the protective shields of the starship. Enterprise shuddered and spat back viciously.

"He's turning away, Captain," Scott said. "Dodgin' back in amongst the asteroids."

Kirk slid out of the command seat and leaned over the helm console, his face intense. "Stay with him, Mr. Sulu," he urged. "I'm not prepared to let him go. Not just yet!"

Propped up against a pile of pillows Spock watched McCoy's face with hooded interest-filled eyes. The doctor was looking at Ilee. At first the native woman had been bewildered, even frightened by the size and brilliance of the starship. To her primitive mind it had been a wondrous temple of the future. But now, dressed in a uniform tunic, she was exploring the possibilities of the ship's library with Christine Chapel. As the pictures changed on the screen of the desk viewer her face glowed with delight, and the sickbay was filled with her easy musical laughter. The look in McCoy's eyes was one of tenderness.

"She is indeed a very beautiful young woman," the Vulcan remarked, responding to McCoy's unvoiced thoughts. "Betrothed to the nephew of a now childless chieftan, her destiny is to become princess and eventually queen of a planet."

"I know what you're trying to say, Spock, and there's no need for you to say it," McCoy muttered. "I realized the way things were back there on the Klingon ship."

"Destiny is a thing none of us can contend with, Doctor. It will have its way."

"Yes, Mr. Spock, it will," McCoy agreed softly, but he was not thinking of himself or of the Vulcan, nor indeed of Ilee - but of a freckle-faced pigtailed girl on a fair blue and white world a long time ago.

"I have him, sir," Scott said. "Range two thousand kilometers and closing."

Kirk watched the screen as a buoyant mountain swelled until it seemed that it must surely topple and crush Enterprise and all life aboard her. Veins of faceted blue crystal glinted in the light of the distant sun and on the craggy ledges Kirk could see a dusting of pure white frost - the last rarified remains of an atmosphere lost when a planet blasted itself to rubble.

The mountain fell away behind, and replacing it in the centre of the screen was a bright silver speck that quickly grew and formed itself into the winged pear shape of a Klingon starship, hanging against the starry backdrop like a deadly discarded toy. As Kirk watched the ship began to swing round so that its globular forward section was towards Enterprise. This time the Klingon was prepared

to stand and fight.

"Steady as she goes, Mr. Sulu," Kirk said with quiet tension. "Cut to one quarter impulse power and stand by your phasers. Mr. Scott, lock phasers on target - and Scotty, make sure your aim's good. We can't afford any mistakes."

"Phasers locked on target, sir," Scott confirmed.

"Phasers on one half power, Mr. Sulu," Kirk ordered. "Fire when ready."

"Phasers firing."

Twin beams lanced out from the underside of the starship. For the briefest instant they licked the bulbous appendages on the tips of the Klingon's stumpy wings. The warp pods glowed red and then exploded as the magnetic bottles ruptured and their contents burst out into the external vacuum of space. Essentially undamaged, but with her space warp capability irretrievably gone, the Klingon vessel began to drift.

Kirk allowed himself just a small sigh of satisfaction. "It's a long way back to the Klingon Empire on impulse power," he said quietly. "Perhaps they'll find time to reflect upon the error of their ways. Set course for the planet, Mr. Sulu - until that stray anti-matter disperses this isn't a healthy place to be."

"Our advisors will be here in a very short time," Kirk said. "They'll help you produce food and fight disease, and combat the dangers of your forests without totally destroying them. And as members of the Federation you will be protected against the people who killed your son."

Tian bowed low, his wise and wrinkled face filled with dignity and his silvered fur aglow in the firelight. "We are honoured to be members of your Federation, Kirk. Your name will long be remembered by my people, and the tale of the fight-in-the-sky will be told beside our night fires for many generations. Always will your people be welcomed here."

It was the last formal farewell. Kirk bowed and the chief bowed, then the old man turned and walked slowly back towards the funeral pyre of his son.

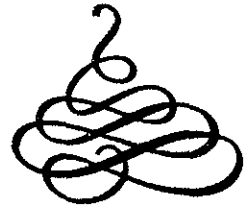
Side by side Kirk and McCoy made their way to the silver-leafed tree. While Kirk spoke to the Enterprise the doctor's eyes sought out and found the young couple where they stood hand in hand watching the fire. The light turned their velvet fur to gold, and their shadows to the deepest black.

"Are you ready, Bones?" Kirk asked softly.

McCoy sighed a little and nodded. "I'm ready."

As the two men shimmered into silver the flames of the fire crackled and leapt high into the sky, and in the east above the forest a brightness in the sky heralded the dawn of a new and different age.

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The slanted, vividly-green eyes of the woman flashed. She tossed her head high, shaking out her mane of midnight dark hair. "You will regret this," she said in a voice that shook with scarcely controlled fury. "You will all regret this!"

"I'm sorry, ma'am," Kirk told her, "but there is really nothing further I can do. I've pleaded your case before the Federation Council, and they've decided irrevocably to deny you even associate membership."

"Very well!" she snarled. "Go on - get back to your precious Federation! But wherever you travel, my curse will travel with you." Her eyes switched in turn to each of their faces. For each of them there was a momentary nausea as his mind was penetrated by a blunt sensory probe, and then her eyes returned angrily to Kirk's face. "Get out!" she hissed.

Kirk inclined his head. "Very well, ma'am." He turned on his heel and walked from the smoky hall without looking back. Outside he waited for Spock and McCoy to catch up with him.

McCoy looked back as the door was slammed shut behind them. "I can't say I'm exactly grief-stricken over taking my leave of that lady," he said feelingly.

"Nor I," Kirk agreed. "Let's get back to the Enterprise before things turn even more unpleasant, and put a considerable amount of space between us and this backwater. Kirk to Enterprise."

"Enterprise. Scott here."

"Mr. Scott, prepare to beam three aboard," Kirk said. "Lock on. Energise."

Kirk watched the murky green planet recede to a speck on the screen and vanish. "Switch to forward scanners," he ordered, and leaned back in the command seat, stretching. "Lt. Uhura, inform Starfleet Command that we're under way to our next assignment."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Maintain your course, Mr. Sulu, warp factor two."

"Warp two, sir," Sulu acknowledged.

Kirk swivelled in the command seat then got up and walked lazily across the bridge to the computer station. He looked up at the Vulcan and grinned. "Two and a half weeks to the next port of call, Mr. Spock," he said. "No rush, no worry, an enjoyable little pleasure cruise."

Spock gazed down at him with an air of innocent puzzlement. "Pleasure cruise, Captain?" he inquired doubtfully.

"Yes. A little relaxation. All the amenities. All the comforts of a home from home. The only thing I can't offer is a sun tan."

"Sun tan?" Spock asked.

Kirk spread his hands. "No beach," he explained.

"Beach?" Spock repeated, giving up the attempt to follow the reasoning of Kirk's brain.

Kirk smiled kindly and shook his head. "Forget it, Mr. Spock. Just forget it," he advised. "You take care of things up here and I'll go and tell it to McCoy."

"As you wish, Captain," Spock murmured, watching Kirk's back retreat towards the turbolift.

He watched the red doors slide together behind the captain and then he raised a hand to his head, pressing the first two fingers against his temple. There was a tenderness there, a soreness that went deep. He frowned at it and with the typical Vulcan attitude set the thought of physical discomfort aside and bent his head once more over the computer console.

Kirk and McCoy raised their glasses and grinned at each other through the amber liquid. "Here's to it, Bones," Kirk said. "Two and a half weeks of perfect peace."

"Huh!" McCoy scoffed. "I seem to remember the last time you said something like that the entire ship's complement came down with a mutation of Tavian worm, and we spent three weeks clearing up the resultant mess!"

Kirk held up his hands. "Don't remind me," he begged. "What do you intend to do with the time?"

"Me?" McCoy grinned. "Apart from eating, drinking and sleeping, I'm going to make a concerted effort to classify those." He jerked a thumb in the direction of the cabinets that lined his walls, and their contents, rank upon rank of anthropoid skulls whose origins ranged from one rim of the galaxy to the other.

"Back to the book." Kirk grinned and raised his glass. "Here's to it."

McCoy swallowed a mouthful and then doubled up, coughing, as a tremble ran through the superstructure of the ship and made the fluid ripple in his glass.

Kirk hammered him hard on the back. "That was trouble if ever I felt it," he said. The intercom bleeped even as he reached for the switch. "Kirk here."

"Spock here, Captain. There has been a minor explosion in the engineering section. Mr. Scott reports superficial structural and circuitry damage. One subsidiary bulkhead has buckled. There is one crewman requiring medical attention."

"Understood, Mr. Spock," Kirk said, frowning. "Assemble a damage control party. Give Mr. Scott all the assistance he

requires. Dr. McCoy and I are on our way."

McCoy, his medical kit in hand, was already on his way to the turbolift.

It was in the early hours of the following morning that Kirk stirred with a dull ache in his stomach. He rolled onto his side and drew his knees up to his belly. The pain stayed with him. He came fully awake and, thinking he had cramp, stretched his body out. The pain increased noticeably with the movement. Kirk felt sweat break out on his body. The sheets became cold and clammy and uncomfortable. He threw them off and tried to sit up on the edge of the bed. A sharp wave of agony swept through the lower half of his body. He wrapped his arms around his body and groaned. The sweat ran down his face in cold beads; his legs were numb and refused to respond; it was impossible for him to walk.

Holding himself tightly he rolled off the bed and dropped to the floor. The impact made him gasp. Inch by painful inch he dragged himself across the floor into his office and over to the desk. He reached up, feeling for the intercom switch. The muscles of his abdomen twisted themselves into knots and jerked the knots tight. Kirk cried out as lights burst in his head. His distant disconnected fingers tipped the rocker switch.

"Kirk... Kirk to bridge," he gasped, his voice sounding little more than a croak, even to his own ears. No voice responded from the intercom. Kirk became aware of a dead, hollow hum coming from the machine. His fingers fumbled to the next switch. "Kirk to sickbay. Kirk to..." Still there was only the warning sound of a disconnected channel. He collapsed, panting, onto the floor. Dizzying nausea washed over him. He retched, and vomited. A black gulf yawned before him and he felt himself slipping over its edge. Resolutely, he dragged himself back.

Using one elbow as a lever he set out to pull himself across the miles of floor that separated him from the door and the corridor beyond. Interminably he crawled until the door towered above him. He raised his hand towards it. With a light hiss of hydraulics it slid back into the wall casing. Kirk dragged himself through it.

The night-dimmed corridor curved away in both directions, humming with the warm, competent silence of the ship. There was no distant sound, no sight of anyone. Kirk got his head and shoulders through the door and then laid his cheek on the cool metal of the deck. The jagged fangs and sharp-nailed fingers of pain reached up and dragged him down beneath the level of consciousness.

When he awoke he still had the pain, but it was not the crippling wrenching pain of the night. It was a penetrating soreness and an ache of bruised muscles deep inside his body. He breathed in and his throat felt as if it had been skinned raw. He lay flat on his back on the sickbay examination table, dressed in clean hospital issue pyjamas and covered with a light sheet. He blinked up at the light above his head and tried to lift a hand to his face. His fingers and wrist felt a long way off, as if they belonged to someone else. He guessed from the heaviness of his arm and the slowness of his brain that he was drugged.

There was movement somewhere out of his range of vision. He heard someone get up out of a chair and walk quietly across the floor to his side. His eyes rolled in their sockets and he blinked. McCoy towered over him, looking down from a great distance. Kirk swallowed and tried to speak. His throat burned. McCoy leaned down to his level, his face swimming into focus.

"Don't try to talk, Jim," he advised. "You've had a nasty time of it." He laid a reassuring hand on Kirk's shoulder.

Kirk looked at the hand curiously, noticing the carefully scrubbed nails and the neat way all the little light brown hairs lay the same way, all the way from the back of the doctor's hand to where they vanished beneath the short sleeve of his tunic. He realised his mind was wandering, and fought back the foggyiness.

"Drink..." he croaked hoarsely.

McCoy straightened and vanished, but he was back in a moment holding a glass of water. He supported Kirk's shoulders with one arm and allowed him to take three small sips before taking the glass firmly away and lowering him back onto the bed. The drink, scant though it was, eased Kirk's throat.

"Bones, what hit me?" he gasped.

"Sssh," McCoy hushed him. "You were in quite a mess when they brought you in last night. I had to clean your stomach out for you. That's why your throat hurts so much."

"What... what...?"

"We don't know what caused it yet. Some form of enteritis, or perhaps it was just something you ate. I sent some samples down to the labs. Results should be back in a couple of hours."

"Spock?" Kirk asked weakly.

"Oh, he came in, looked at you and grunted a few times, then went out again. He's on the bridge now, so I guess he's taking care of things. You can just lie quiet and take it easy for a while."

Kirk managed a frail grin and nodded. "What about... the damage in engineering?"

"Scotty's fixing it up. The man who was injured had two burned arms and concussion. He'll be all right in a week or two. Ah..." McCoy looked up. "Here's Nurse Chapel come to give you a wash and brush up, and then we'll see if you can stomach a little liquid nourishment."

As it happened, Kirk proved able to take nourishment, indeed the thick white fluid did almost nothing to alleviate a growing hunger. Afterwards he had a short deep sleep and by the time Spock reappeared in sickbay at about mid-morning, Kirk was sitting up in bed and looking decidedly more cheerful.

The Vulcan walked to the end of the bed and looked along its length at him. "You are recovering from your indisposition, Captain?"

"Thank you, yes, Mr. Spock," Kirk whispered, and gestured to his throat. "I'm afraid I don't have much voice this morning - McCoy

took the skin off my gizzard."

"I quite understand, Captain. I have come to assure you that there is no need to concern yourself over the welfare of the ship or the crew."

"No, I'm sure there isn't, Mr. Spock," Kirk agreed. "But there is one thing you can do for me."

Spock raised an eyebrow. "Captain?"

"The intercom unit in my quarters is malfunctioning. Last night, when I needed help, I couldn't make anyone hear."

"I'll see to it that the fault is rectified immediately."

McCoy came out of his office and looked up from the report pad he was reading. "Oh, hello, Spock."

"Good morning, Doctor. I came to inquire after the captain's health."

"Well..." McCoy looked at Kirk. "You can see for yourself, he looks a darn sight better than he did first thing this morning. A day's rest and he'll be back on his feet."

"Less than a day, if I have anything to say about it," Kirk grunted. "I'm getting bed sores already."

McCoy chuckled, but knowing him as he did Kirk noticed that the laughter did not quite extend to his eyes.

"Doctor." Spock turned from the bed as if he had had an afterthought to his visit. "I would trouble you for one of your headache tablets before I leave."

"Oh?" McCoy looked up at him, his face taking on an immediate expression of concern. He knew how rarely the Vulcan desired or admitted the need for medication. "Are you sickening?" he asked. "Let me look at you."

Spock shook his head and backed away. "There's no need of that, Doctor, it's merely a headache."

"I'm the doctor around here," McCoy said, putting the report pad down. "I'll judge what's wrong with you and what I give you for it. Sit down in a chair."

Spock looked unhappily towards his captain, his face pleading.

"Do as the man says, Spock," Kirk told him. "As he says, he is the doctor."

Spock sank, stiff-backed and wary, into a chair, eyeing McCoy's approach with a medical scanner from beneath his eyebrows. The doctor set the small device spinning and passed it over the Vulcan's head and neck.

"There doesn't seem to be anything wrong," he admitted. "I'll give you your tablets."

With a bad grace Spock accepted the two small yellow pills into the palm of his hand and beat a rapid if dignified retreat.

Kirk shook his head reproachfully. "That wasn't really necessary. You know how he hates to be examined."

"Oh, I know all right," McCoy agreed, grinning, "but it doesn't do him any harm to submit that pride of his once in a while."

"You just enjoy tormenting him."

McCoy chuckled wickedly and then sobered as his eyes fell once more on the report pad. He picked it up and scowled at what was written there.

"Jim," he said, "this stomach trouble of yours. From the lab reports it looks like something you ate caused it."

Kirk frowned deeply. "I don't see how that can be. I only had a steak. The kitchens are..."

"No. No, I don't mean that." McCoy broke his own rule and sat on the side of the bed. "According to this analysis report, the samples from your stomach contained traces of Atusic acid."

"That's a poison, isn't it?"

"It's used for a lot of things. Some forms of plant life thrive on it, and it kills those nasty white grubs that live under your skin, the ones that originated in the Orion system. But taken internally it is a poison. Small doses over a long period accumulate with much the same result as lead poisoning. Larger doses bring on the experiences you went through last night, extreme pain, numbness in the limbs, sickness. If it's not treated in time it can lead to coma and death."

"In that case," said Kirk, "I have to thank you for your prompt action."

"All part of the service. The thing that worries me is, how did Atusic acid get into your stomach?"

"Where's it kept?"

"Well, there's some in the labs. It's stored as dry crystals, quite inert until dissolved in an activating agent. Once in a concentrated fluid form you could have eaten it with your food or drunk it in your coffee. It's quite tasteless. The question is, how did it get there?"

Kirk thought for a long moment and then slowly shook his head. "I don't know, Bones. I just don't know. Some sort of... accident?"

"Hm!" McCoy snorted. "Another of the great unsolved mysteries, I expect, but I'll ask a few questions round and about."

"Do that," Kirk agreed. "And you'd better get those food dispensers checked, just in case."

Kirk ate a very light lunch of what McCoy chose to call solid food, although Kirk, looking at the slop, could think of several far more apt descriptions. However to please the doctor and expedite his release from sickbay he swallowed it down. It gave him a pain in the belly for a while, but then that went away and he felt comfortably

replete. He dozed for half the afternoon, and then boredom set in. Sickbay, when no-one but yourself was sick, was not the most interesting place to spend one's time!

He tackled McCoy about it, and after much argument and objection persuaded him that he was well enough to make his way to the bridge.

Kirk found that the ship was operating with the usual standard of efficiency despite his absence. He sat down in the command seat and Spock came down from the computer and stood beside him.

"Maintaining course and speed, Captain. Damage control party estimates nine hours for the completion of repairs to the engineering section."

"Very good, Mr. Spock. Is there any indication of what caused the damage?"

"A faulty fail-safe circuit, sir. Mr. Scott is in the process of rectifying it."

"Good." Kirk leaned back. "I'll take over here for a while. You go below decks and take a break."

Spock looked at him doubtfully. "If you're sure..."

"I'm sure," Kirk grinned. "Go ahead."

Spock nodded and turned, heading not ungratefully for the turbolift.

As the doors closed behind him the pain in his head that had been troubling him all day increased abruptly. Alone as he was, he was able momentarily to allow his defences to drop. He closed his eyes and leaned his burning forehead against the cool metal of the wall.

Kirk looked at the steadily marching stars on the screen in front of him. They never failed to cast their spell of fascination over him. Their differences in size, colour and configuration were endless in their variety. They appeared from nothing in the central vortex of the screen, swelled steadily as the starship approached, and then passed off the edge of the screen and fell behind as they passed out of the range of the forward scanner.

After a while Kirk got up and walked around the bridge balcony, looking over the shoulders of the crew at the multitude of lights on the consoles. He stopped beside Uhura. "Any word from Starfleet, Lieutenant?"

"Negative, Captain. Nothing since the routine acknowledgement of our last message."

Kirk nodded and moved on. He found that the boredom had travelled up from sickbay with him. He was a man of action, and inactivity proved infinitely wearying.

"Mr. Sulu, increase speed to warp factor four," he ordered. "Lt. Uhura, if I'm needed I'll be in engineering."

"Yes, sir."

The turbolift doors closed behind him. He took hold of the metal lever and twisted it until the light glowed. "Engineering level," he ordered.

The lift generator responded with a mounting whine and he experienced a slight lightening of the stomach as the cage dropped into the descent shaft. He sensed immediately that there was something wrong. He could hear the discordance in the sound of the motor. Before he could do anything the cage gave a violent jerk that knocked him off his feet and sent him sprawling across the floor. He felt light-headed, nauseated, disorientated. He was dropping with tremendous speed towards the bottom of the shaft. He struggled to his feet and pulled himself round the walls, using the levers as hand-holds. With the heel of his hand he rammed in the manual control circuit. The cage shuddered as the brakes came on, and wobbled violently in its own slipstream. Kirk felt it slowing down and took a deep breath, becoming aware of the sweat that was growing cold on his skin.

The lift cage lurched again, shunting suddenly sideways before it had actually come to a halt. Kirk grabbed once more for the lever and missed. He staggered and landed once more, with bruising force, on the floor. He could hear the generator racing wildly beyond the walls and the cage smoothly began to pick up speed again. Kirk clambered onto his hands and knees. The air was screaming past outside. Kirk crawled forward, struggling against the speed that drove him back. The flesh rippled across his cheeks and his lips drew back from his teeth in an involuntary snarl. It was becoming difficult to breathe. He reached up with sweating fingers to the manual control. He pressed it and once more the cage began to slow down. This time he kept a firm hold until it had slid to a complete halt and the doors opened.

He staggered out, his legs numb jelly beneath him, and drove himself to the nearest intercom. "Kirk to bridge," he gasped. "Sulu, go to the environmental control unit and turn off the entire turbolift system. It's not to be used until it's been entirely checked out."

"Yes, Captain," Sulu said, sounding surprised.

Kirk took a deep breath to steady himself and pressed another button. "Kirk to engineering."

There was a pause. "Engineering. Scott here."

"Scotty, detail some men to check the turbolift system."

"Whatever's the matter with it, sir?"

"I don't know, but it just nearly killed me."

"I'll get some men on it right away."

Still shaken, Kirk made his way by means of the companionway ladders to deck 7 and sickbay. McCoy took one look at his pale face, pushed him promptly down in a chair and poured a stiff drink.

"Medicinal purposes," he said, holding out the glass. "What happened?"

Kirk swallowed the brandy in a gulp. It made him feel better. "Turbolift," he said. "Nearly made pulp of me."

McCoy frowned. "Have you done something about it?"

"It's out of action. Scotty's seeing to it."

"Hmm," McCoy grumbled. "You seem to be making a habit of narrow squeaks."

Kirk managed a weak grin. "Some vacation," he agreed.

Kirk scowled at the report pad. "I don't understand," he said. "What can it mean?"

"I wouldn't like to say about the implications of it, sir," Scott said, "but the facts are what they are. The turbolift control was programmed to disassociate itself on the receipt of your voice pattern."

Kirk shook his head. "But that's impossible. What... who... could have done that?"

"I don't know, sir. But whoever it was was highly skilled and had a complete knowledge of the computer system. It was a beautiful job." Scott sighed with grudging admiration.

"Captain, the same can be said for the intercom in your quarters," Spock said. "That too was sabotaged, and by an expert."

Kirk looked at him and then stared down at the report pad again with bewilderment and dismay.

"You've got to face it, Jim," McCoy said gravely. "Someone aboard this ship is out for your life. That Atusic acid didn't get into your food by accident. Somebody put it there, that much is obvious now, and then fixed the intercom so that you couldn't call for help. And then this business with the turbolift. That's two determined attempts to kill you."

Kirk looked at each of his friends. "But who? And why?"

"If correctly evaluated, we should have sufficient data to establish who," Spock said. "Perhaps then we should discover the reason why."

"Very good, Mr. Spock," Kirk agreed, handing the report pad back to Scott and making a concerted effort to pull himself together. "Gather all the information you can from Scotty, McCoy, the labs, the damaged equipment, and run it through the computer for analysis. I want to get to the bottom of this, and as soon as possible."

Spock inclined his head. "Acknowledged, Captain."

For Spock sleep was impossible. All through the long night he lay on the top of his bed, his hands at his sides clenched and twisted in the covers, and he suffered. Pain lanced through his temples with fine needles of fire, piercing deep into his brain. He stared up unseeingly at the ceiling, and unbeknown to himself, he uttered little whimperings of agony.

Kirk pressed the button of the wall intercom and spoke to the bridge. "Kirk here. Give me the First officer."

"He's not here, sir. He went down to the physics lab. Shall I call him for you?"

"Er, no, Lieutenant, I'll go along there. Kirk out."

Kirk made his way along the curving corridor to the door of the laboratory. The room was large, brightly lit and humming quietly with the sound of idling equipment. It was also empty. There was no sign of the Vulcan anywhere. The door closed quietly behind him.

"Spock?" Kirk called. "Mr. Spock?"

There was no reply. Kirk started across to the door on the far side, picking his way between the work benches.

There was a soft clicking sound from the side of the room.

"Spock?"

Kirk turned. There was no-one there, only the yawning black opening of the pressure chamber door. Kirk went over and peered inside.

"Mr. Spock?" he inquired.

There was no response from the Vulcan, but again he heard the clicking sound coming from the back of the chamber. Kirk ducked inside and went to find out what was making the noise.

He never did actually discover the cause of that elusive sound. The pressure chamber also doubled as a wind tunnel, and was frequently used as a combination of both. Consequently it was both solidly constructed and long. Kirk was two-thirds of the way along it when the circular door behind him slid across the opening and dogged tight. Immediately Kirk heard the sound of pumps starting up and the hiss of air being sucked out through the valves. He started to run back towards the entrance, already feeling the pressure drop on his skin, and cursing himself for a fool. Now that the trap was sprung it was only too obvious.

There was a thick crystalline port in the door, necessary for direct visual observation of the experiments. Kirk's ears were tingling as he reached it. He sucked at the rarifying air and peered through the port, at the same time pounding on the unyielding metal with his fists. Through the port he could see the Vulcan sprawled on the floor, either unconscious or dead, Kirk couldn't determine which.

There was a singing in his head and his ears were hurting. Something warm ran down his neck, tickling. He put up a hand and his fingers came away wet and red. He hammered on the door, shouting at the top of his voice for help. He tried to draw a deep breath and found that there was almost no air left. Sirens sang maddeningly in his head, the blood ran freely from his ears and nose, his eyes felt as though they were being dragged from their sockets. His pounding on the door became weaker, his shouting mere gasping.

Through a grey haze he saw the door slide open and a

white-coated lab assistant come through it. The man saw Spock laid out on the floor and started towards him; then he caught sight of Kirk's bug-eyed, bloodstained face in the pressure chamber port, and veered off, running for the control console.

Kirk's lungs snatched at the air as it rushed back into the chamber. He sank to his knees as the door slid open, and concentrated on breathing. Just breathing.

The lab seemed suddenly to be full of people. Willing hands helped him from the chamber and a chair was found for him. Someone was calling urgently over the intercom for a doctor. Kirk accepted a tissue with shaking hands, and wiped some of the blood from his face.

"Spock?" he asked.

One of the men looked up from the Vulcan's side. "He's breathing, sir."

McCoy came through the doorway and looked round rapidly, assessing the situation. His eyes swept over Kirk and he knelt down at Spock's side, feeling for a pulse. A medical team arrived with a trolley. McCoy waved them over.

"Get this man to sickbay," he ordered, "and be careful with him. Jim, you come with me."

Kirk stood up, and was glad of McCoy's arm to steady him.

McCoy spent a considerable amount of time with Spock while Christine Chapel bathed the blood from Kirk's face and neck. Then he came and very thoroughly examined the captain's ears.

"You can thank your lucky stars for your resilience," he said with an agitation that Kirk knew meant that he was rattled. "Another few seconds and you'd have had burst eardrums and collapsed lungs."

"And no future," Kirk added honestly. "How's Spock?"

McCoy looked towards the examination table where the Vulcan lay. "He's deeply unconscious," he said, frowning. "That's about all I can say at the moment."

"Whoever locked me in that pressure chamber must have hit him."

McCoy looked at him oddly. "I don't know about that," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"There was no sign of a struggle in the lab," McCoy said. "Spock's as strong as a bull buffalo. He wouldn't have gone down without a fight."

Kirk accepted a cup of coffee with a grateful grin and sipped at it. "He must have been taken from behind."

"It would take one hell of a crack to fell Spock with a single blow," McCoy remarked.

"Agreed. I don't see..."

"Jim..." McCoy looked at him squarely. "There isn't a mark on him."

Kirk put his cup down on the table. "Bones," he said, "what are you saying?"

"I don't know what I'm saying!" McCoy shook his head, genuinely bewildered. "I just don't know!"

"Well, what's the matter with him? You're saying he's unconscious. Is he... shamming it somehow?" The words stuck in Kirk's throat.

"No." McCoy shook his head. "He's in a coma, but I can't for the life of me find out *why*! There's not a bruise or a lump or a cut anywhere. A blow hard enough to put him out like that would have opened his skull."

"Have you considered... other causes?" Kirk asked. "What about drugs? Gas?"

"There's no trace of gas in his system. As for drugs, well, I've sent samples of blood and urine to the labs, but somehow... I doubt it."

The door slid open and Scott came in, his face lined with worry. "Captain Kirk, are ye all right, man?" he asked, his concern making him forget all formality and his accent burring.

"I'm fine, Scotty," Kirk assured him. "Our unfriendly friend tried again. This time he almost made a double hit."

Scott looked puzzled and then turned his head with McCoy's nod and saw the Vulcan. "We've got to do something about this," he said decisively, "or it'll not stop until one or the both of you are dead."

"Agreed," Kirk said. "Spock had that data almost ready to run through the computers. It looks as if you'll have to do it."

"Doctor!" Christine called from the Vulcan's side. "I think he's..."

Spock stirred and a low shuddering groan came from him. He raised both hands to his head and tried at once to sit up. McCoy planted a hand firmly on each shoulder and pushed him back onto the bed.

"Lie still!" he ordered.

Spock fought him momentarily and then relaxed. His head rolled feverishly. His lips parted, panting for breath.

"You're in pain," McCoy said gently. "Where is it? Tell me where it hurts."

Spock looked at him, his eyes bright. "My head," he said in a tight, carefully controlled voice. "Pain..." He closed his eyes and pressed his lips hard together.

"Sedative, nurse," McCoy ordered. He passed a medical scanner over the Vulcan's skull and his frown deepened at the result. Christine returned with a full hypo. "Just relax," McCoy said,

applying the nozzle to the Vulcan's shoulder. "This'll ease it."

Spock tried to flinch away but McCoy, knowing his phobia, held firm. "It's all right - it won't put you to sleep." He pushed the plunger and there was a sharp hiss.

Spock's eyes closed and for a full minute he lay still, his hands twisted in the sheet. Then he took a deep breath and relaxed. He looked at McCoy. "Thank you, Doctor. For once your medication is welcome."

McCoy nodded guardedly. "You're welcome. Do you feel up to answering a few questions?"

Spock's eyes switched from his face to Kirk and Scott, standing behind him. "I'm all right," he said.

McCoy stepped aside and Kirk took his place at the bedside. "Spock, can you remember what happened to you?"

There was a troubled look in Spock's eyes as he shook his head. "Pain... in my head," he said. "I was working in the lab, and there was pain. I... don't remember."

"Were you alone in the lab? Was there anyone there with you?"

"No. Nobody there."

Kirk frowned. There was something inconsistent here. "The pressure chamber - did you see anyone in the pressure chamber?"

Spock gazed at him, his almost black eyes confused.

"He doesn't know what you're talking about, Jim," McCoy said. "The drugs are getting to him and making him dopey, and he's still in pain. Let him rest a while and he might remember more clearly."

"All right," Kirk agreed, and laid a reassuring hand on the Vulcan's shoulder. "You let McCoy take care of you for a while. You hear?"

Spock nodded his head against the pillow. "I hear, Captain."

Kirk, Scott and McCoy withdrew to the far side of the room.

"Keep a close eye on him, Bones," Kirk said slowly.

"Jim, you don't think that Spock has anything to do with...?"

"I just want a close eye kept on him," Kirk repeated. "He's a friend of mine."

McCoy shrugged. "All right," he agreed.

Kirk nodded and left with Scott. They walked side by side to the turbolift.

"The First Officer'd give his life before he let anything happen to you, sir," the engineer said. "I'm sure he's got nothing to do with all of this."

"I know all about his loyalty, Scotty. I don't question it for a minute. But there's something going on here that none of us

understand. I want you to run that data through the computer first chance you get. That might provide us with some answers."

"I'll have it processed for you by morning, sir."

Kirk nodded and took the turbolift to the bridge while Scott made his own way to engineering.

Kirk spent the afternoon and evening not exactly in fear, but he was aware of a sort of tension within himself. He had supper with McCoy in the officers' wardroom, and afterwards, with a glass of brandy warming in his hands, he felt his spine, aching from being stiffened against an expected blow, begin to relax." How's Spock?" he asked.

"He was sleeping when I left. The pain in his head seemed to be easing."

"That's good. Has he said anything?"

"No. Any concerted attempt to question him upsets him. The pain increases again. But I'll be quite honest, Jim - I don't believe he knows anything. Spock wouldn't try to murder anyone. Least of all *you*!"

Kirk stared unhappily into his glass. "I know that, Bones. We all... know that. But it doesn't bring us any closer to a solution. Scotty's going to run everything we've got through the computer. We should have an answer by morning. I intend to try and get a good night's sleep before then."

McCoy yawned in sympathy. "That sounds like a good idea. I'll be heading for the sack myself before long. I've got to go back to sickbay and make a final check on Spock and change the dressings on Chamberlain's arm. He's not as comfortable as I'd hoped."

Kirk emptied his glass and pulled a grim face. "The way things have turned out I keep wondering if that blast wasn't meant for me in some way."

"You're getting morbid in your old age," McCoy said with a grin. "Goodnight, Jim."

"Goodnight, Bones."

McCoy took the turbolift to sickbay and after disposing of their glasses Kirk headed for his quarters.

The sickbay lights were dimmed. McCoy looked around and his eyes fell at once on the rumpled sheets and empty examination table.

"Nurse!" he shouted. "Nurse Chapel!"

"Doctor?" Christine's voice came from the office. They met in the doorway.

"Where's Mr. Spock?"

"But he's..." Christine looked beyond him to the empty bed.

"He was there," she breathed. "Just a few minutes ago he was there."

McCoy gazed at her for one second and then walked quickly to the intercom. "McCoy to Security. The First Officer is missing from sickbay. He's got to be found and returned. He may be dangerous, so be warned."

"Acknowledged, Doctor," a voice said determinedly.

McCoy flicked the switch off and then on again. "McCoy to Captain Kirk." He waited. There was no response from Kirk's quarters. "McCoy to Captain Kirk! Jim!" Still there was no reply. McCoy ran for the door. "I've got to get to him before Spock does!" he shouted back.

Kirk glanced behind him at the empty corridor. That was becoming a habit. Reassured, he made the last part of the journey to his quarters. The door opened for him and he was already halfway through it when he heard the distant sound of men's voices, shouting. He turned, his mouth opening to voice a query. A tall lean shadow loomed out of the dark room behind him. Kirk sensed the movement and half turned, his mind registering alarm. Something heavy and solid smashed down on the side of his head.

The blow was deflected by the turning motion of his body. Had it not been his skull would have burst open. The object glanced off bone and the momentum carried his assailant on past him. Kirk fell to his knees, leaning forward on braced arms. Blood dripped from his head onto his hands. He couldn't see anything but he could hear voices, men's voices, coming closer.

His attacker heard them also. He had turned to come at Kirk again, but now he hesitated, listening. Kirk heard his rapid breathing but was unable to do anything. There was a swift decisive movement and footsteps sounded in the corridor, walking rapidly away. Someone shouted. The footsteps began to run. There was more shouting and the shrill whine of a phaser beam. Kirk folded onto the floor and lay still.

McCoy ran to the open door and threw himself onto his knees beside Kirk's body. He pulled a pad from his medical kit and laid it on the wound behind Kirk's ear, leaning on it, trying to stem the bleeding with pressure.

"Get that damned Vulcan!" he hissed. "Get him!"

Kirk came to very slowly. It was warm and dark and there was a soft warm bed under him. He felt drowsy and comfortable. His head was completely numb and tightly bandaged. His eyes, when he tried to open them, were very, very heavy. He blinked and his surroundings swam into focus. He was in bed in the hospital ward in sickbay. He drew a deep breath and rolled his head on the pillow. Someone moved close at hand. A cool cloth dabbed at his face.

"Lie very still, Captain," Christine Chapel's voice said from a pale oval that floated above his face.

The oval moved away and Kirk relapsed into a fitful doze. When he opened his eyes again there were two hazy out-of-focus faces above

him. One of them leaned close, and he recognised McCoy.

"Bones?" he mumbled from lips that were numb and senseless.

"Stay quiet, Jim."

Kirk gripped his wrist. "I'm all right." He tried to pull himself up, using McCoy's wrist as a lever. He felt abruptly sick and lay down again.

"That'll teach you," McCoy growled. "Now do as I tell you and with a little luck and a great deal of my skill you'll be all right."

Kirk raised a tentative hand to his head. "Someone hit me," he said, remembering. "In my quarters, someone..."

"Our Vulcan friend," McCoy nodded. "He's turned bad on us, Jim. He laid your head open to the bone. Another minute and he'd have brained you."

Unaccountably Kirk felt something stinging his eyes. "No!" he said fervently. "Not Spock. He wouldn't..."

"He was seen, Jim," McCoy said gently. "Seen and shot at. There's no doubt."

Kirk closed his eyes and drew a long deep breath, struggling hard with a concept that was utterly impossible by anything he knew and believed, and yet was a proven fact. He let the breath out with a sigh and looked at McCoy. "Where is he?" he asked.

"We don't know. He moved too fast for us and got away. The security details are searching the ship."

"I don't want him hurt."

"He won't be," McCoy assured him gently. "I want you to lie as still as you can - there are a lot of stitches in your head. Do you want a drug to help you sleep?"

"No, I don't want to sleep."

McCoy nodded and straightened up. "All right," he agreed, knowing that now was not the time to push his medical authority. "But don't move around too much. There'll be someone within calling distance all night." He moved away from the bed, gesturing to the nurse to go with him. He paused briefly to look at the man sleeping restlessly in the opposite bed and then vanished through the door.

Left alone, Kirk closed his eyes and rolled his head away despite the soreness of the stitched wound. Suddenly he felt very small and vulnerable and alone. His mind drifted back over the years. He and Spock had met on a dark shore on a dark distant planet, two young men at the very outset of their careers, each full, in his own way, of his own enthusiasm and ambitions. They had talked and walked beside that tideless sea together, and looked at the stars, and discussed the future. They had not liked each other, not then, not at once, but they had both been aware of a rare attraction.

After that long evening they had met several times on a variety of Federation worlds and bases. They had had a nodding acquaintance, the odd exchanged word, two ships passing in the depths of eternal night.

When Kirk had come aboard the Enterprise, his first independent starship command, the Vulcan had been there, firmly established as ship's First Officer. For a while they had fenced with each other warily, and then settled down to a working relationship that had matured and developed most satisfactorily, to the point where the powers at Starfleet Command were loath to part them. They had become two men thinking and acting as one. Both had given and both had received, and their friendship and loyalty had grown slowly, naturally - or so Kirk had thought until this night.

Now something had snapped. *NO!* No, he couldn't believe that, even now. It was more as if a wedge had been driven between them. Kirk hoped fervently that the fissure was not irreversible. At last, exhausted by his trials, he fell into a fitful sleep.

The sickbay door opened and a long dark shadow fell across the entrance. Christine Chapel looked up, and then laid down her stylus and stood up slowly. Spock looked at her from the doorway, his face lost in the darkness. Only the high ridges of his cheekbones were highlighted, two bright stars in his eyes, a blue sheen across his hair. He moved very slightly, only as if breathing. Something glinted in his hand, low down by his hip - the long, smoothly curved blade of a Vulcan war sword.

Christine stood quite still and watched him, and for a long moment he stood in the doorway and watched her. Then his eyes shifted, the gleam in them moving with them. He began to walk slowly and silently towards the door of the ward as if stalking some wary creature.

Christine backed away, using only her legs and keeping her body quite still. Spock didn't seem to notice. The door to McCoy's office opened behind her. "Doctor," she said tightly. "Come quickly!"

McCoy left his desk and came at once. At the sound of her voice Spock had stopped and turned. His eyes met McCoy's. His face was harsh lines and gaunt angles, his eyes deeply sunken into shaded hollows. He wore the Vulcan mask of expressionlessness, but there was something tortured in his countenance, something to be pitied.

"Spock," McCoy said softly, "Come into the office. Let's talk this over."

Spock turned away, not understanding, not hearing, and continued his slow advance on the ward door, the sword held loosely at his side.

"Stay here and don't move," McCoy told Christine, and went back into his office. She heard him speaking quickly into his intercom.

"Security, get some men up here at the double. The Vulcan's here and he's bent on blood!" Moments later he reappeared, his face grim and a phaser in his hand. Christine gasped and wrung her hands as he strode determinedly across sickbay.

Spock stopped at the end of Kirk's bed, hesitated momentarily as if undecided or... resisting? Then with both hands on the haft he swung the sword up.

Across the ward Chamberlain stirred, put a hand to his forehead,

opened his eyes. He stared for a moment of frozen horror at the unbelievable tableau and then he moved, throwing himself the length of the bed. He leaped from the end of it, his bandaged arms flailing. He hit the Vulcan full in the back and they went down together in the space between the beds. Chamberlain felt Spock wriggle lithely beneath him, felt the powerful surge of muscles throwing him easily aside. He lashed out at the black head with his forearms, gasping and gritting his teeth at the pain of the impact on his burns.

Surprisingly, Spock cried out. He got his legs under him, straightened in a single movement and shook himself, breaking Chamberlain's grip and tossing him away. The crewman landed on his arms, whimpering with pain.

Spock ignored him. In a smooth swooping gesture he retrieved the sword from the floor and turned once more to Kirk, the razor-sharp blade poised to swoop down. Their eyes met, and the sword stopped for a moment at the zenith of its upward sweep. Kirk saw two things in the depths of the dark brown eyes. One he recognised, an evil raging hatred; the other was the gentleness of the friend he knew struggling with the overwhelming insanity in a battle it could not hope to win.

McCoy fired from the doorway, a short but stunning burst of green energy. Spock's body became rigid as the cold green fire flowed over him and then, as it faded, he folded slowly onto the deck. The sword clattered from his hand.

McCoy walked round the bed and knelt down on one knee beside him, feeling for a pulse. Having found it and satisfied himself that it was regular and strong, he picked the sword up gingerly by the hilt. The thin lethal blade glinted.

Boots pounded across the sickbay floor and three red-shirted security guards appeared in the doorway, phasers drawn. McCoy gestured to the inert body of the Vulcan. "Take him out," he said softly.

"He's insane, Jim," McCoy said. "Murderously, and as far as I can tell, incurably insane. The only place for him is an institution."

"No, Bones." Kirk shook his still sore and heavy head. "He's not mad. *She's* the one that's mad. *She's* the one that's determined to kill me. To get what she considers her just revenge."

"She?"

"The woman. Do you remember what she said? *'Wherever you travel, my curse will travel with you.'* She meant what she said. Don't you see? Wherever I go, Spock goes too. She did... something to his mind. She has control of his body. I saw... her... in his eyes, and he was fighting her with every ounce of strength he had."

"I don't know if that's possible," McCoy said doubtfully. "Spock's not susceptible to hypnosis, that mind of his won't submit. And he has a very high pain threshold."

"And yet those headaches he's been having have put him in agony," Kirk reminded him. "She must be able to exercise immense

power over him to induce pain like that. She must use pain to control him."

"More likely those headaches he's been having are produced by Spock's own efforts to fight her influence. As I said, his mind doesn't submit."

Kirk looked at him. "I don't believe he's aware of what she's been making him do. It must be something that goes deeper than hypnotism. Something fundamental."

McCoy frowned deeply. "If that's true," he said, "there's nothing we can do for him. We're just not advanced enough, medically or scientifically, to interfere with those deeper levels of a man's mind. And the Vulcan mind is one of the most complex known to man."

The intercom bleeped and Scott's face appeared on the screen, the lights of the computer glowing behind his head. "I've just run the computer analysis, sir, but I don't suppose you'll be needin' the result now."

"It's what we expected, Scotty?"

"Aye. Thinkin' back on it, it was as clear as day. The First Officer was the only one with the technical skill to rig the turbolift control that way."

"We often fail to see the obvious, Scotty, especially if it's something we don't want to recognise. Don't worry about it."

"Aye, sir." Scott's unhappy face faded and the screen became blank once more.

"The woman, using Spock's own skills and knowledge to make him destroy me," Kirk said.

"And after you, what else?" McCoy asked. "The Enterprise? The Federation?"

"There's a good deal of damage he could do."

"The only thing we can do is get him to a Starbase. Hand him over to a proper psychiatric hospital. I can't help him. I don't know how."

"No. We can't do anything for him, but maybe he can do something for himself."

They stopped side by side in the doorway. The Vulcan lay unresisting now, his arms and body secured to a hard mattress with tight unyielding black straps. The pain-driven fury with which he had fought for his freedom when his senses first returned was gone, drained out of him. His face was turned away from them and the tension in his neck made the tendons protrude like thick cords.

"Can I talk to him?" Kirk asked.

"You can try, but I don't guarantee the response. He's in a great deal of pain. Nothing I can do seems to ease it."

Kirk nodded and walked softly over to the bed. "Spock," he said gently. "Spock, do you hear me?"

The black head of hair rolled against the pillowless mattress. Spock's slanted eyes were bright with pain, but lucid. He recognised Kirk.

"Captain?" he inquired. "What's wrong with me? Why am I under restraint? No-one will tell me." There was trust and honesty in his face, and Kirk knew that he truthfully didn't understand what was happening to him.

"You tried to kill me," he said frankly. "Several times."

The change of expression that came over Spock's face was terrible to behold. His lips parted and then closed again. His eyes filled with utter bewilderment, fixed on Kirk's face. Then, gradually, another expression replaced it, one of distress.

"No, Jim." Spock shook his head slightly. "No, I..."

"It's not your fault," Kirk told him gently. "Your mind is being taken out of your control. You're being made to do it against your will. Do you remember what that woman said about her curse?"

Spock nodded. "I remember," he said, and then his whole body jerked against the straps. His face twisted and a sharp breath screamed in through clenched teeth. Kirk and McCoy winced in sympathy. Spock muttered something in Vulcan, tossed his head and then repeated it more forcefully.

"What did he say?" McCoy asked.

Kirk rubbed the back of his hand across his mouth. "The pain, the pain," he translated.

Spock turned his head to look at him. There was a trace of sweat glistening on his upper lip. "The woman... has my mind?"

"In some way we don't understand, yes," Kirk explained. "McCoy says there's nothing we can do to free you of her. But there might be something *you* can do."

Very slightly, Spock nodded. "I understand you, Jim," he said, and closed his eyes with a gasp. His breathing rasped a moment, in and out, and then steadied. He released a long pent breath and for a long time remained quite still.

The minutes dragged by in silence, and his eyes remained closed. Then he sighed and looked at Kirk. "Yes," he breathed in almost a whisper. "She's there. I can feel her."

"Can you... drive her out?"

"I don't know. I can try."

Kirk touched his arm reassuringly. "We'll be here."

Spock fixed his eyes trustingly on Kirk's face and then closed them as if going gently to sleep. His body relaxed. McCoy produced a tissue and carefully began to dab away the beads of sweat that formed on the Vulcan's brow.

Deliberately Spock utilized the inherited abilities of his

ancestors and sank his awareness beyond the conscious level of mind. There were the regions he knew and consciously ordered and cared for. Here was stored his knowledge and experience, ranked ready for reference and use. He could have likened it to a well-stocked library, each shelf and each section neatly labelled and cross-referenced. This was his domain where no-one dared intrude. There was no danger to him here.

He moved deeper into an area he was less sure of, but one he rarely questioned. Here was implanted the strict training of Vulcan childhood, the blocks and prohibitions of his youth. He knew better than to tamper with these. They were the very foundations upon which his existence was based, the bulwarks without which the conflict of his mixed heritage would flood in on him on an overwhelming tide, bringing with them irreconcilable insanity. Here he dared do nothing but observe in awe and wonder at the strength of his own mind.

He descended still further, entering the limbo where instinct ruled. Here he preferred not to examine himself too closely. Here was a place where there was no control, little reason or order, and the confusion and senselessness dismayed him and made him ashamed. Fear ruled here, the natural drive to retreat from danger, to defend one's life above all else, to hide from unpleasantness and embarrassment. Spock passed by here with uncomfortable haste, on into the region he most despised, and most feared.

Superstition. A thing that Spock would not admit existed even to himself. It lurked here in the very well of the depths of his mind. All the primeval terrors of his people, buried out of sight, ignored, denied, but in Spock brought to awareness by the blood of his mother. Unlike his Vulcan forefathers he found it impossible to crush them into oblivion beneath the iron-clad heel of logic. Always there was that tiny lingering doubt that sustained their existence.

He walked tentatively here, tiptoeing in the vaulting chambers. Empty they were; there was nothing to see or hear to confirm or disprove the ancient ancestral fears.

Something stirred in the blackest corner like a sleepy cat.

"Come out," Spock ordered. For a moment there was no response. "Come out!"

There was a stretching movement and she emerged from the shadows. He saw the essence of her, with her slit green eyes and the flowing dark curtain of her hair.

"So you have come to find me," she said. "I doubted if you would."

"I know you now. I do not fear you. I have come to cast you out. You will leave now."

She smiled a thin mirthless smile that lit her eyes from within. "I shall remain with you until your Captain is dead by your hand. Until your ship is destroyed and your Federation set at odds. You are a tool. I will use you. You cannot resist."

"No. I am not your puppet and I refuse to do your bidding. You will leave."

"Then it seems there must be a victor between you and me," she said. "When that is decided, then so shall Kirk's fate be."

"Yes," he agreed uncompromisingly.

"However," she went on, "if we are to fight it will be on my ground and in my manner."

Spock experienced a very odd sensation. It was as if he was falling a long long way without any actual passage through space or time. He descended into and through a dimension which was incomprehensible to him.

McCoy wiped the freely flowing sweat from the Vulcan's face and dropped the saturated swab into the already filled basin. Kirk looked across the bed at him.

"It's been three hours," he said. "How much longer can he stand up to this?"

McCoy laid his hand low down on the left side of Spock's chest, feeling for the rapid throb of the Vulcan's heart. "He's under terrific strain. His heart's racing away. The pain must be unimaginable."

Kirk looked at the wet pale face of his officer. "What's going on?" he grated. "What's happening?"

"They're fighting each other for their existence," McCoy said. "Only one of them can survive. The sanity of the other will be irretrievably lost. Neither of them can suffer defeat and exist in the rational universe merely at the tolerance of the other."

Kirk himself swabbed the sweat from the Vulcan's face. "We don't know her strength," he said fretfully.

"No," McCoy agreed, "but neither do we truly know his."

A cry wrenched itself from Spock's lips. His body arched upwards, bruising against the straps. His fists clenched, his nails digging through the skin of his palms.

Kirk leaned close to him. "We're here, Spock," he said softly. "The doctor and I, we're here."

If the Vulcan heard he was incapable of giving any sign. He twisted, as if trying to free himself physically from the pain inside his skull. The straps strained, and held.

It seemed that he stood in a vast chamber carved out of the living rock. Light sifted in from an unseeable source, dimly illuminating the rough brown facets. There was coarse sand beneath him, and high above the walls leaned together to form a ceiling.

"This is your battlefield?" he asked. "With what do we fight?" The woman's voice chuckled from nowhere, and everywhere, and that was his only response.

There was nothing else for him to do but to proceed. It was as if he floated. He moved whichever way he wished merely by willing it to be so. All his senses were functioning, all his faculties were present, and yet he knew that this place with all its sights and

sounds and feelings was merely a production of the imagination. His or hers, he was not sure which. Anything that he experienced here would only actually happen in as much as he was aware of its occurrence.

The walls of the chamber became indistinct. There was a blue mist rising up out of the ground around him. He stopped moving and remained quite still, waiting. The mist thickened. Swirling tendrils twisted and knotted, obliterating all perception of distance.

He was expecting attack, but not in the form or from the direction from which it came. He realized abruptly how alone he was. His existence, his former life aboard the Enterprise, seemed infinitely far away and unimaginably long ago. There was no-one here, or anywhere, who cared where he was or what was happening to him. An ache formed itself in his gut. Loneliness descended upon him, wrapping him in deep folds of despair.

He remembered how once, a long time ago, there had been a man named... Kirk? Yes, that had been his name. They had been close, in a masculine sort of way. They had had a good relationship. He recalled the way Kirk had looked at him sometimes with a tolerant half smile that had understood the way his own mixed heritage could tear him apart. But Kirk was gone now, he could see his face only dimly.

And there was another, too. A woman, even further back in time, who had held him so close against her and spoken soft words and even sung the sighing lullabies of her home world wistfully to an alien child who could not understand and had only come to appreciate what she had done so long afterwards that he wanted to weep.

He struggled to fight back the tears, all the while cursing himself for an emotional fool, but the faces of his mother and Jim Kirk floated before him, haunting spectres from a time he could barely remember.

And then he felt pain, and with it fear, the terror of physical injury to add to mental torment. He lifted his hands before his face. They had been dipped in acid. The skin peeled back, the flesh melting and dissolving away to leave exposed bones. He stared with terror and frozen horror, too numbed to feel the pain.

Part of his mind screamed out a warning. He teetered on the edge of insanity. His body was rotting, falling away before his eyes...

A single cold clear thought cut through the panic like a knife. He had no body. His physical form lay on an examination table in the care of his friends.

His friends! Abruptly it became clear to him. He remembered his earlier assessment. Everything that occurred was no more or less than pure mental experience. In the physical sense it was unreal. He had no hands. He just didn't believe it. He knew it! The melting stumps vanished. Nor could there be any pain. The agony ceased.

Spock began to understand the environment. He wondered about the blue mist. The mist remained. It seemed that positive thought was the essence of control. He decided that there was no mist. There was a powerful resistance fighting against him, and then the

air cleared. He was once more in the vast rock chamber.

He became thoughtful, considering what he had learned. The environment was not static. It could be altered to meet the demands of whoever's will was the stronger. Spock decreed that it would be darker, much darker. Despite the furious resistance of the woman, the light dimmed. Satisfied of his ability Spock set to work in the darkness.

When it was finished he moved back into the deepest shadows and waited patiently for her to come. He was confident, but not careless - that he could not afford. This was a place that she had created, and he was here at her bidding; she might have more resources yet with which to surprise him. She had driven him once, mentally, to his knees by using his inherited emotions against him. Had she not made that one mistake in her impatience to conquer him, he would have been at her mercy. And she had none.

She came at last, moving softly in the darkness along the path that he had created for her. He observed her with a detached clinical interest, for he knew that she would go to the very edge of the pit, and then he would have her. She appeared as he had first seen her, a long pale high-cheekboned face, straight smoothly draped black hair and the boring, slightly glowing emerald eyes.

She hesitated, as if she sensed that he was nearby, and then she moved forward once more, drawn compulsively to look down into the heart of the sickening monstrosity that lay in the bottom of the pit. She recoiled and turned to flee in horror and revulsion, but he was there behind her, cutting off her retreat.

"Now you will leave," he said for the third time.

Passionately insane fury argued with her fear for a moment, won. "I will not," she said defiantly.

He shrugged. "Your alternative lies down there."

"You are not stronger than I!" It was an accusation.

"No. I cannot do what you have achieved. I merely have superior control over this environment which you have created."

"You have created that thing! Now you must exist with it! If it ever escaped from there it would destroy your sanity utterly."

"I know," he agreed. "But it cannot escape. And no more could you."

"You would imprison me with...that ?!" she asked.

"You have another choice. Leave."

"That would cost me my own sanity!"

"Yes. But is that not a preferable alternative?"

She stared behind her into the pit, and then she lashed at him with vicious desperation. Almost nonchalantly he retaliated, hurling her back to the very lip of the pit.

"Choose," he said.

The woman drew herself up very tall. "Very well," she said. "I will go. But I pity you, existing with the creation of that!"

Her image shimmered and diminished to a single speck, the colour and brightness of her eyes, and then winked out. He heard the echo of her first insane shriek echoing back, and then he was alone. He looked at the thing in the pit almost with indifference, and it regarded him in much the same way. They were well used to each other. Then he turned and wearily began to make his way back.

McCoy came out of the ward and returned the empty hypo to the dish on the table. "Another nightmare," he said. "I've quietened him now. We'd best leave him in peace."

Kirk nodded. "Will he be all right?"

McCoy didn't look at him. He stared down at the table top, frowning deeply.

"He will be all right, Bones?"

McCoy sighed. "I think he'll be all right," he said. "It'll take time. A man's mind heals only slowly. But eventually... with care... he'll be back to his usual cheerful light-hearted self."

Kirk met his eyes gravely. "You're sure about that?"

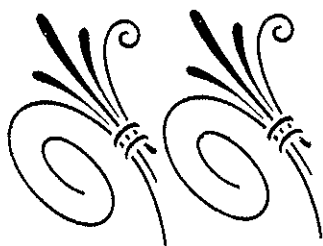
"Damn it, I have to be sure! Otherwise he'd have to be put ashore. But I'm not saying he'll not carry a scar. A lot went on in the deeper levels of his mind that you and I'll never know about, and wouldn't understand even if we did. I don't think he'll ever get completely over it. He'll...remember."

And that was what Kirk had to accept. "All right, Bones," he said. "We've got ten days left of our so-called vacation. I can't think of anything better to do with the time than help a friend forget a bad memory. Can you?"

McCoy gazed a wistful moment at the ranks of skulls on his shelf.

"No," he agreed. "I can't."





The Red Carpet Treatment

Captain James T. Kirk, master of the Starship Enterprise, had left the official reception early. He'd felt guilty about doing so, but he had had a headache and the purple velvet night had seemed cool and inviting. From amongst the array of ambassadors, diplomats and five star generals, he had doubted that he'd be missed.

The night was still dark and the breeze chilled his moist skin. High up, he could see the stars winking. His head hurt intolerably and now it was more than a headache. He raised a tentative hand and winced with the pain. His fingers came away wet and sticky.

Under his back, the ground was uneven and small stones dug through the cloth of his uniform jacket. The soft breeze fanned his cheek, and he realised that his mouth was parchment dry.

Gathering his strength, he used his hands and elbows to push himself into a sitting position. The world spun dizzily and red spots flashed in front of his eyes. The blackness threatened to close in again, and he put his head between his knees and fought it back manfully.

It had been one hell of an evening.

The day had gone smoothly enough. The ceremonials and speeches, the parades and meetings had run on well oiled wheels and now the Oritanians were well and truly members of the Federation. Tonight's party had been the final event in Kirk's crowded schedule, and he had been glad to escape earlier than he had planned to spend the hour or so gained walking in the famed gardens of Oritanis. Now he wished sincerely that he had stayed behind and got thoroughly drunk. At least that way his head wouldn't hurt as much as it did now!

The blackness retreated and he opened his eyes. Slowly, his vision cleared. Blurs formed themselves into the slender intertwined trunks of ornamental trees. Beneath him, the gravel of the path took on a more normal granular appearance. Kirk drew a deep breath and savoured the cold air in his burning lungs. His pulse beat pounded in his head wound, and a lump of his hair, heavy with blood, fell down cold across his fevered forehead. The chill of it brought him back to his senses.

His right hand grabbed at the back of his belt. His communicator was gone, but something else troubled him more. The discreetly small phaser unit was also missing.

Now fully alert, he forced himself to his feet. He wavered and swayed like a reed in a strong wind.

A few moments with his eyes closed helped steady him, and then he looked down. The ground seemed a very, very long way off, but he searched it diligently.

There was no sign of either mechanism.

With a sigh, he gave it up and started uncertainly back towards the grand white pillared house. The trees whispered in the light

breeze and a smell of sweet oranges wafted round him. The path wandered, and Kirk's steps wandered even more, often leaving the path for the fine springy grass which, for some reason, he remembered never grew longer than an inch. A low branch swiped at his head and made it spin again.

And then he was at the top of the rise and the silver sweep of drive curved away to the high white portico. There were still lights blazing throughout the house, and through the open side of the ballroom he could see the sparkle and flash of uniforms and flowing gowns. The party was still in full swing. Kirk estimated that the fourteen-hour night could not be much more than half gone.

The house seemed a hundred miles away and his legs felt like lead, but he made it; yard by yard, dragging one foot in front of the other. Half way, a shallow pool surrounding an elegant statue provided water to wet his parched lips and to tip over his head before he set off again.

An indeterminate and interminable time later he felt the first of the shallow steps under his feet. It was a surprise, and he stumbled on it. He formed a cry in his stomach and throat, but when he opened his mouth, nothing came out but a harsh croak. On his hands and knees on the steps, he wondered about that. He wondered just what he was doing there, and he wondered at the blood that seeped from a freshly-torn finger nail.

He pushed with his feet and the stonework moved back under his eyes. One hand over the other he clawed himself forward, though he no longer knew why.

Then there was something soft and red under his hands. He focused his eyes on it and made out the intricate woven pattern of a carpet.

Somewhere, right at the end of a long tunnel, a woman's voice screamed, long and piercing. There was a stricken silence and then a growing rumble of confused voices which swelled inside his head until he feared it would burst, and then died away into the blackness of oblivion.

When he came to, the universe was red inside his eyelids and somewhere in the back of his skull there was an incessant pounding that was trying to knock him back over the lip of the bottomless pit out of which he had just climbed with such effort.

A voice close by said something, and the voice was familiar. He knew it from a long time ago, a time before the pain in his head had come. He opened his eyes experimentally and light pierced his brain. Shapes moved and coalesced, there was a man's face and he was speaking. Kirk strained to catch the words but they didn't seem to make any sense.

Then, suddenly, a name came into his mind, a name that fitted the face.

McCoy. The man's name was McCoy, and Kirk had known him well. Knew him well.

That was better. That sounded more right.

The man - McCoy - spoke again.

"Jim?"

Kirk knew that name as well. It was his own. He opened his mouth to speak and felt his lips crack. "M... McCoy?"

A friendly hand was laid on his shoulder. "Don't try to talk, Jim. We're taking care of you. You don't have to worry about a thing."

Kirk frowned, and felt the wound in his head pull. He did have to worry. There was a phaser missing, and it had to be found quickly.

The McCoy face floated in front of him again, closer, clearer now. Deliberately, Kirk formed words with his lips. "Must find... must look..."

"Now take it easy, Jim."

McCoy would keep interrupting. It destroyed his chain of thought and made it so much more difficult to formulate what he had to say.

There was something silver in the McCoy person's hand. It came close, and passed out of his range of vision. He tried to follow it, but the movement of his eyes made his head spin again. There was a touch on his shoulder and a hissing noise accompanied by a sharp prickling that was not painful but yet again, not pleasant. A warm glow originated in the region, and spread slowly through his body. The pounding in his head receded and the ripples of a warm, soft sea lapped against him.

Without conscious volition, he relaxed into the warmth and the darkness closed in once more.

Spock gazed icily at Dfel across the broad polished top of the commissioner's desk.

It was not possible to tell at that distance what the Oritasian was thinking. Dfel had the yellow, poreless skin of his race, the wide cheekbones, inscrutable almond-coloured eyes and domed, partially shaven head. He interlocked his thin, knobble-knuckled fingers on the desk top and returned the Vulcan's stare implacably.

His invitation to Spock, to beam down and discuss the events of the previous night, had had the ring of a command about it, and to add to the impression, the uniformed Oritasians that stood on either side of the door looked remarkably like guards.

"I regret sincerely the death of Ambassador Aala," Spock said after consideration.

Dfel nodded. "So do we, Commander. So do we," it said in its singing voice. He or she - Spock was not sure which; in this odd three-sexed society it didn't seem to matter. It fell silent and for another long moment the two looked at each other. Two frown lines deepened across the bridge of Spock's nose as his puzzlement increased.

"Your Excellency, I do not understand - "

"Ambassador Aala was murdered," Dfel said. "With one of your Federation weapons."

Spock raised an eyebrow. "Indeed?"

"Yes, indeed." Dfel reached below the desk, and when its hand reappeared, it held a standard issue basic phaser unit, just the right size to fit into a man's fist. Dfel laid it carefully on the table between them. Spock looked at it. "One of yours?" Dfel asked.

"It could be," Spock said carefully. "I should have to check serial numbers."

"Of course, of course." Dfel gestured generously. "But you can believe me. It is one of yours." It smiled, a thin, mirthless smile that made Spock feel even less at ease. He was saying nothing, but he knew full well that when Kirk had been brought aboard unconscious, both his communicator and his phaser had been missing from his belt.

Dfel seemed to read his thought. It asked, watchfully, "How is your Captain this morning?"

"Captain Kirk is seriously ill with multiple head injuries," Spock said slowly, his eyes still on the phaser.

"Ah, yes. So I was given to understand. Most unfortunate."

Spock raised his eyes and looked at Dfel curiously. It was hard to be certain, but he had sensed an odd, almost sarcastic ring in the tone of the lilting voice. He tipped his head very slightly to one side.

"You did not summon me here merely to inform me of the Ambassador's death, Excellency," he said wily.

Dfel smiled again, that same thin, uninviting smile. "It is not your intention to leave Oritanis immediately, Commander Spock?"

"We are scheduled to remain in orbit here two more days, and then to assist in returning the visiting dignitaries to their home worlds."

"Good." Dfel's smile became infinitesimally more genuine. "I hope we shall not be forced to detain you longer than that."

"Detain us, Excellency?" Spock asked, his eyes becoming hard.

The commissioner gestured broadly. "A mischoice of words, Commander. Naturally we wish to unravel the mystery of the Ambassador's death with the utmost speed."

"Naturally," Spock agreed, still wary.

Dfel got up and walked with him to the door. "I hope that Captain Kirk makes a speedy and complete recovery," it said. It was a parting pleasantry, and they both knew it as such.

Spock inclined his head gravely. "Your Excellency."

Dfel bowed, and the door closed behind him with a soft click.

Alone in the plush corridors, Spock found his own way back to the street and stood on the step of the building looking at the city. All the structures were raised above street level, their entrances reached by flights of wide shallow steps. The scale of the architecture was vast for a people of such small stature, and contained an element of barbarous grandeur. The paved street was broad and fairly well filled with people; although the official document signing was over, a planet-wide holiday had been proclaimed that would last another four of the long days and even longer nights, as the celebrations went on.

Without doubt the favourite colour of the people of Oritanis was red. Their furnishings were red, they dressed in red, some of them even painted their skin red. Men, women and thwees - it was very difficult to determine which was which - milled about in an imaginative, if somewhat monotonous to the alien eye, profusion of scarlet, crimson and vermillion, and the air rang with their cackling laughter.

It was a curious society based on the grouping and inter-marrying of the various trades and professions rather than the family unit, which was trisexed and laced with an intricate complexity of relationships. As Spock understood it, the reproduction was bisexual while the thwees - or *its*, as Spock had noticed the ship's surgeon gleefully chose to call them - were responsible for bringing up the young. However, while an interesting study, the society of the Oritanians was not Spock's immediate concern. His mind was working furiously in an attempt to discover the underlying reason for the apparently pointless summons to the office of Dfel, native commissioner to emissaries of the Federation.

The death - indeed, the murder - of Aala, Ambassador of Moork II, was a most serious matter, coming as it had at the successful culmination of prolonged and occasionally bitter discussions of the merits, and lack thereof, of accepting Oritanis' membership application. Despite this, the Ambassador's demise had little or nothing to do with Starfleet, presently represented by the Enterprise; and less than nothing to do with Spock personally. However, Dfel's production of the phaser had complicated the matter.

Spock had no doubt that the unit was Kirk's missing one. The weapons were dangerous, and treated with respect by those who had possession of them. For one to be lost and another used so recklessly was too much of a coincidence to be entertained.

Spock had a feeling that he had been warned. He was not sure what of, because the warning had been couched in the most polite of diplomatic terms, and unlike his father, Spock was no diplomat. Nevertheless, the warning had been conveyed.

Spock took his communicator from his belt, and returned to the ship.

Against the pillow, Kirk's face was peaceful and as pale as death itself. Part of his light brown hair had been shaved off and his head was heavily padded and bandaged.

Spock stood quite still and looked down at him, deep in

thought. He heard McCoy come quietly up behind him but he did not turn round.

"How is he, Doctor?" he asked, almost in a whisper.

"He's badly concussed," McCoy said, equally subdued. "There's fluid gathering on the brain. If the pressure doesn't soon ease I'll have to operate."

Spock nodded, never once taking his eyes from Kirk's still face.

"What did you find out down there?" McCoy enquired.

"The Moorkan Ambassador was murdered last night with the Captain's phaser."

"With Jim's phaser? How do they know? A phaser doesn't - "

"It was a low gain beam, Doctor. There were sufficient remains to establish the cause of death."

McCoy pulled an unpleasant face. "But why Jim's phaser?"

"I saw the weapon. It was the Captain's."

"Oh."

For a few moments they both stood and looked down at the man on the bed. "What are they going to do about it?"

"Unknown, Doctor."

"Well, what do they expect us to do about it? What did they want to see you for?"

Spock raised an eyebrow at him and went to answer the intercom which had been whistling for his attention. "Spock here."

"Mr. Spock? I have a message direct from Starfleet. Direct to you, sir."

"I'll come to the bridge, Lieutenant." Spock went out of the door without a backward glance at either Kirk or McCoy.

Uhura looked up at Spock as he came onto the bridge. He went directly down the steps to the command seat.

"Put it on the screen, Lieutenant."

The view of the turning planet was replaced by the stern, grey-eyed features of Admiral Davingdon.

"Commander Spock," the Admiral began gravely. "Starfleet has received a priority A message from the governing authorities of Oritanis. The information is that Ambassador Aala of Moork II has been assassinated and that the authorities have reason to believe that a member or members of the Enterprise crew may have been involved. They request that the departure of the Enterprise be delayed until their investigations have been completed. This request has been granted. You will maintain your orbit until further notice and assist the Oritasian authorities in any way they require. Stardate 2796.2, P.A. Davingdon, Starfleet Command." The screen cleared and the planet reappeared.

Spock's first thought was a very Human one. Someone didn't waste much time. The second thought was more Vulcan; one of admiration for the speed and accuracy with which that same someone could turn the wheels of authority.

He got out of the command seat and went back up the steps to the balcony. "Lt. Uhura, send a standard acknowledgement to Starfleet."

"Yes, sir."

"Mr. Spock!" Scott turned from the power boards, a scowl on his square features. "Aren't you going to object?"

"Object, Mr. Scott?"

"Aye, sir. None of our lads would ha' killed any Ambassador. It's not... not..."

"Logical, Mr. Scott?" Spock supplied. "The Oritasian authorities seem to think that it is, and they have the backing of Starfleet Command."

Heedless of their stares, Spock made his way round the balcony to the computer and settled himself at the console. Very soon he was lost in a review of the ship's tapes concerning the events and political dealings leading up to the admission of Oritanis to the Federation.

Briefly, their membership had been opposed by two races, the Shikites and the Farabs, and one small but vocal group of Humans, the Humanistic Spacial Society.

The Oritasians' main sponsors had been the Humans, which automatically meant that they would get in as Humans held half the seats on the Council, and the Moorks, who had discovered the race and were anxious for their protege to make good. From all reports the debate in the Council chambers of the galaxy had been fast, furious, and - in some instances - actually violent.

As a people, the Oritasians had things to be said both for and against them. They were diligent and resourceful, their level of intelligence was well up to the accepted standards, they had achieved interplanetary travel within their own system unaided. They were generous and hospitable, and fond of celebrations - as the last few days had proved. They were also phlegmatic and literal-minded, they had primitive and unenlightened ideals of justice and they were exceedingly stubborn. Also they took a savage delight in trickery and enjoyed an element of secrecy in all their dealings.

"Mr. Spock, I have a message from the planet's surface," Uhura called. "Commissioner Dfel, sir. He requests that you return to the planet. He says it's urgent."

"Acknowledge, Lieutenant," Spock left his seat and made his way back to the turbolift doors. Scott and Uhura watched his progress with enquiring eyes, and when he had gone they exchanged anxious glances.

Looking once more across the desk into the inscrutable almond eyes of Dfel, Spock felt the sense of unease that had been growing in his mind develop into a certainty that something was going to happen

that affected either him... or Kirk... or the Enterprise. The alien was still watchful, still calm, but tense with a sort of expectancy. It was enjoying this.

"We have some new evidence, Commander Spock," he said, watching the Vulcan narrowly. "Evidence of great importance."

"And that concerns me?"

"Indirectly, yes. A witness has come forward. A witness who saw the murderer leaving the Ambassador's apartments. He identifies the man as Captain James Kirk. Also this was found, dropped by the man as he fled." It produced Kirk's communicator and laid it on the desk.

Spock allowed nothing to show on his face. Although it was a shock, he had been half expecting something of the sort.

"That is quite impossible, Commissioner," he said after a moment's pause. "Captain Kirk was attacked and seriously injured before Ambassador Aala was killed."

Dfel intertwined its fingers in front of it and smiled its thin smile over them. "So you tell me, Commander," it said.

"Your own people are witness."

"I think we should hear what Captain Kirk has to say."

Spock's eyes became hard and dark. "At the present moment, Captain Kirk is unable to say anything."

"Again I have only your word for that."

A slight scowl came to Spock's face. Whatever he said, it was plain that this being was not going to believe him. "Call my ship," he said. "They will confirm what I say."

"I'm sure they will," Dfel agreed. "You are, after all, their senior officer, and they owe loyalty to their Captain."

"Then beam up with me and see for yourself."

"I think not, Commander," Dfel said placidly. "Any party I could assemble would be greatly outnumbered aboard your vessel."

"The Enterprise is a Federation ship. Your safety is assured."

"I think it would be better if you simply had your Captain beamed down."

"The Captain is too ill to be disturbed."

"Commander Spock!" Dfel's eyes narrowed to slits, the pitch of its voice becoming even higher with irritation. "I'm sure it is unnecessary to remind you that a very important man has been killed. Moork is a valued ally of Oritanis. It is essential that those responsible be brought to justice with the utmost speed."

"And you are accusing Captain Kirk?"

Dfel twisted its fingers together. "I cannot alter the evidence or the testimony of a witness. Your Captain will receive a fair

hearing."

"Captain Kirk is a military officer. If you have any charges to lay against him he will answer them in a military court accredited by the Federation."

Dfel shook its head. "I'm afraid that won't do at all, Commander. The murder was committed here on Oritanis. The murderer will be tried on Oritanis, and, if found guilty, will be punished by Oritasian laws!"

"Oritanis is a member of the Federation. Federal laws now apply here."

"I do not think you are equipped to argue such a fine point of law with me. I understand you recently received a message from your superiors. May I ask the contents of that message?"

"I'm sure that if you have sufficient knowledge of Starfleet communications to know that I received a message, then you are already aware of its contents." As Spock had already allowed to himself, he was no diplomat, and he was no longer in a mood for playing diplomatic games.

Dfel merely smiled. "Of course, Commander. I believe the exact wording was that you were to assist us in any way we required. I ask now that you carry out your orders and assist us. Have your Captain beamed down."

"I'm sure that Starfleet misunderstood your communication, Your Excellency," Spock said.

"Do you refuse?"

"They could not have realised that you intended to charge Captain Kirk with this offence, or that you meant to subject him to - "

Dfel banged its hand down on the desk top. "Do you refuse?"

"Until I have contacted my superiors, Your Excellency, I must," Spock said quietly. He turned towards the door. He saw no signal from Dfel, but the guards moved to bar his way. Spock eyed them coldly and turned back to the desk. Dfel was still seated, watching him closely.

"I think you will change your mind, Commander Spock," it said icily.

Knowing the two guards were behind him, Spock felt the skin of his back creep. "I am an officer of Starfleet," he said. "I came here in good faith. You have no reason to hold me."

"I require your Captain, Spock. We have you. It may be that some exchange may be arranged."

"Starfleet would never - "

"Starfleet!" Dfel gestured angrily. "Starfleet is half a galaxy away. This is a matter between Oritanis and your ship. It will be settled long before Starfleet can have any noticeable effect on the outcome. Our legal procedures are extremely swift."

"I do not intend to surrender Captain Kirk to you or to your..."

justice."

Dfel smiled. "In truth, Commander, I never expected that you would."

Spock sensed, too late, the evil intent in the room. He reached for his communicator.

Something pricked his throat; the point of one of the short serrated-edged swords that were the planet's principle weapons. There was another at his stomach, the tips of the teeth piercing his shirt. The faces of the guards were intent. They'd use the weapons, and one gash from those savage blades could lay a man open. Spock met Dfel's eyes across the desk.

"You will remain here as our... guest," the commissioner said mildly, "until some agreement has been reached. Perhaps in the meantime our hospitality might persuade you to alter your stubborn refusal to carry out your orders. Take him!"

Spock stood quite still, held motionless while his phaser and communicator were taken from him. Then his wrists were bound behind him, and he was turned and led from the room.

McCoy was busily engaged in scrubbing his hands when Scott arrived in sickbay. He scowled over his shoulder at the engineer.

"Scotty, do you know where Spock is?"

"Planetside, Doctor. They called him back more than two hours ago."

"God curse all Vulcans!" McCoy swore. "Why is that man always under my feet when I want him out of the way, and never around when I want to talk to him about something important?"

"Is it the Captain, Doctor? Is he worse?"

"Yes, Scotty. He's a lot worse. There's pressure building on the brain. I have to operate right away to relieve it. I wanted to talk to Spock first - to prepare him."

"It's that bad, Dr. McCoy?"

"It's that bad. Jim could easily die under the knife. I don't know how Spock'd take that. There's something between him and the Captain that defies my understanding."

Scott nodded, knowing what McCoy meant. "I'll try to reach him on his communicator, Doctor."

"Don't bother, Scotty. We couldn't discuss it at a distance, and I don't have time to wait for him to beam up. If he comes aboard, tell him what's happened. Try to warn him."

"Aye."

Scott watched McCoy go through the door towards the operating theatre, carefully not touching anything. He was followed at once by a trolley bearing a still, shrouded figure. The door closed and the bright lights of the theatre came on. Scott shook his head sadly and

made his way back to the bridge.

Uhura looked up as he came out of the turbolift. "Mr. Scott, I have a message from the planet's surface."

"The First Officer?"

"No, sir." Uhura looked puzzled. "Commissioner Dfel."

"Put him on the screen, Lieutenant." Scott went down the steps and stood beside the command seat.

The almond-eyed Oritasian replaced the view of the planet. "You are in command of the Enterprise?" Dfel asked.

"Aye. Temporarily."

"Then I have a proposition for you. Your Captain is required to stand trial for the murder of an important personage on this planet. Your Starfleet's orders are that you surrender him to us..."

Scott shook his head. He had no idea what was going on but he wasn't surrendering Kirk to anyone, even if Kirk had been in a condition to be surrendered. "I'm very sorry, sir. Captain Kirk's not in a condition to beam down and discuss the matter with you."

Dfel ruffled. Apparently the commissioner was not a 'sir'. "I thought that would be your reply. It may interest you to know that we have your senior officer here with us. We do not intend any harm to come to him, of course... but feeling is running somewhat high. Aala was a much loved person both on Oritanis and on Moork."

Scott scowled at the screen. "Are you threatenin' our First Officer, sir?"

"Threaten? No. I'm merely warning you that the wrath of the people may be visited upon the most available subject. The Vulcan of course had no hand in the death of the Ambassador. Whereas your Captain... Well, let us say there is considerable evidence. Why should the innocent suffer?"

"Captain Kirk is at this moment fighting for his life on the operating table," Scott told him staunchly. "What you are asking is out of the question, man."

Dfel smiled its thin smile. "In an Oritasian trial, the condition of the accused is immaterial. Only his presence is required, so that the sentence of the court may be carried out. Afterwards, the Vulcan would be returned to you unharmed."

"Scotty!" Uhura said from the communications console. "You can't -"

Scott gestured her to silence. "You'll have to give me time to think about it," he said, outstaring the Oritasian defiantly.

Dfel inclined its head. "Certainly. You have until midnight. I feel we could not contain the anger of the people longer than that." It nodded again, almost bowed, and faded from view.

"Scotty!" Uhura hissed. "You can't consider turning the Captain over to them! You know what their 'justice' is like. Even if he could speak for himself, he wouldn't stand a chance!"

"Aye," Scott agreed. "I know that. But if they've got the First Officer, we're going to need all the time we can get to find a way to get him out of there in one piece!"

Uhura turned at once to the communications console. "Enterprise to Mr. Spock. Mr. Spock, come in please. Enterprise to Mr. Spock!"

A hollow hum of silence answered her. She looked at Scott.

"He doesn't respond, sir."

"Aye. Then we have to believe that they've got him," Scott said. "What we have to do now is think of a way to get him out before they take him apart!"

The room was dingy, grey and unfurnished.

Still bound, Spock sat on the floor in a corner and watched the light of day fade beyond the bars of the single window. He was cold, uncomfortable and he had a headache.

No-one had been near him; he had been left alone from the moment he had been thrown into this cell and the door slammed shut and locked behind him. Presumably he had been intended to think about his situation, and he had done a considerable amount of thinking. Oritasian justice and persuasive techniques had a reputation, and if he were to remain in their hands, his prospects were not pleasant.

There was movement beyond the locked door. The sound of a key in a lock. Spock climbed awkwardly onto legs that were numb with cold and inactivity.

The door swung slowly open, and Dfel walked in and looked around leisurely before its eyes came to rest on the Vulcan. Two guards followed it through the door, one of them carrying the traditional sword, the other a pistol of phaser design. Spock didn't look at the commissioner; his eyes were fixed on the weapons.

"You look most uncomfortable, Commander," Dfel said, smiling slightly. It flicked a finger at one of the guards and the man stepped behind Spock. The thin tight cord slackened and the guard stepped back.

Spock examined his bruised wrists and then looked at Dfel enquiringly.

"Not the most inviting of habitations, I'm sure you'll agree," Dfel remarked, regarding the grime with distaste.

"You're not invited to stay," Spock told him coldly.

Dfel's eyes sparkled. "A sense of humour in a Vulcan? Remarkable. But I'm sure you have far more refined tastes than this. Incomparably more comfortable accomodation could be found for you until after the trial, if you would only see fit to co-operate with us." Spock merely looked at him and said nothing. "You are a stubborn man," Dfel sighed. "But it would seem that your crew is less so. They are at least considering the proposition of an exchange."

Still Spock remained silent and not a muscle of his face moved. Dfel's affability died.

"I can see you are determined," he said. "Your crew has until midnight to make their decision. Perhaps before then your screams will help convince them. I will give you one more hour to consider. Then we will see the colour of Vulcan blood." It looked intently into Spock's face for one moment more, and then turned on its heel and walked out of the cell, followed more slowly by the guards.

Scott looked anxiously at the men on the transporter platform.

"Ye know what it is ye have tae do," he said. "We're beamin' ye down right into the heart of that Bastille down there. Our information is that the First Officer was taken there after his arrest this morning, and that he's still there now. As soon as ye find him, call us up and we'll beam ye all out."

"Yes, sir," the Lieutenant nodded.

Scott turned to the transporter chief. "Beam them out."

The generators hummed with power and the six figures shimmered into nothingness. Scott touched the intercom button. "Lt. Uhura, is there any reply to our message to Starfleet Command?"

"Yes, Mr. Scott. Admiral Davingdon instructs us to retrieve the situation without surrendering either officer to the Oritasians. And to avoid a diplomatic incident!"

Scott growled and muttered something most uncomplimentary about the corridors of power resembling the maze tunnels of Surbik 9.

The whine of the transporters died away and left the six men standing in the gloomy corridors of the prison building. The Lieutenant looked around and consulted his tricorder. The readings were confused by the thickness of the walls and the warren-like nature of the building.

He gestured to the men, leading them forward.

The passages of the prison building were twisting and uneven. The walls were massive blocks of cold stone, the floor irregular slabs. There were uneven shallow steps, sharp corners and occasional vast chambers that echoed hollowly to the sound of the men's footfalls. The building was an old one, modernised with up to date lighting units in crevices high in the walls. Despite that, there were still dark shadows that lurked in corners and seemed sometimes to shift at the edge of one's vision when the eyes turned away. Around the walls of the larger chambers there were doors set at intervals, massive metal doors, and behind them the tricorder indicated life.

The Lieutenant kept his men moving fast, watching the tricorder for the flick of a needle that would say 'Vulcan' instead of 'Oritasian'. The Oritasians were very sure of their security; there were few guards in the inside of the prison. Only twice did they have to cower back into the shadows as a pair of armed natives patrolled past.

The Lieutenant turned with the tricorder. The needle stirred minutely, indicating a new direction through the labyrinth of passages. Another chamber opened in front of them. The Lieutenant looked round briefly, his main attention focused on the tricorder, and went on.

Too late, he recognised that they had been led into a trap. The Oritasians were suddenly all around them, their almond eyes flashing.

Dfel stepped forward and smiled a thin, thin smile. The blades of the wicked serrated swords glinted and the Oritasian guards moved in. A blade flashed, and a man screamed, his blood splashing high on the wall. The Lieutenant felt a lash of agony sear down across his chest and belly. He looked down and saw something dark spilling out of his body.

His paralysed hand clawed at his communicator.

"Mr. Scott! We're being slaughtered! Beam us ..."

McCoy washed the last of the blood off his hands and dried them carefully on a towel. Behind him in the ward, a man was moaning in fear and pain. A nurse moved to unfasten McCoy's stained surgical gown. He motioned her away.

"Never mind that. Get that man a sedative." He turned to Scott, his face grave. "Well, Scotty, what do we do now?"

"I don't know, Dr. McCoy. I just don't know." Scott shook his head and stared at the cup of cold coffee in front of him. "I've lost two good men and there's four more so seriously hurt that... It's more than I dare do to send any more men down to that place."

"Agreed," McCoy said grimly. "But what about Spock? We can't leave him down there at the mercy of those butchers."

"Mercy?" Scott asked bitterly.

"We have to get him out, Scotty!"

"Aye," Scott nodded. "But how?"

"I don't know!" McCoy paced across the room and back. "Doesn't Starfleet have any control over those barbarians?"

"The Oritasians don't seem to believe in the official channels, Doctor. I think the First Officer would be dead a long time before the envoys from the Federation could even get here."

McCoy shrugged out of the gown and scowled at the dark stains. "I think you're right," he admitted.

"Of course," Scott said thoughtfully, "I could charge up the phaser banks and blast holes out o' the middle o' a dozen o' their major cities."

"I think that would amount to Starfleet's 'Diplomatic Incident'," McCoy said dryly, "and I doubt if it would help Spock."

"Aye," Scott conceded. "But it'd give me a great deal o' satisfaction." There was an awkward pause. Then Scott asked, "How

is Captain Kirk now?"

"He's more comfortable now that the fluid pressure on the brain's been relieved. He's still critically ill. It's up to us to think of a way to get them both out of this."

Spock had heard the sounds of the fight even through the thickness of the door and a Human man's voice screaming. Then silence had fallen and the memory of what he had heard remained in his mind to haunt him.

The sky beyond the bars was now completely dark. He stood quite still below the window, his eyes fixed on the door.

It was exactly an hour by his reckoning before the key sounded once more in the lock and the door swung open. Dfel came in, followed as before by two guards, and also by a third Oritasian who carried a low, three-legged stool, a pitcher and a shallow bowl. He set the stool down on the floor and stood the pitcher and bowl on it. Then he stepped back and watched the Vulcan narrowly.

Spock looked at Dfel. The commissioner's almond eyes were mere slits of pale gold. Its hands were clasped in front of it and were quite still. In them it held a thin two foot length of pliable wood, its tip pointed towards the floor.

"We have neglected you too long, Commander Spock," he said. "I'm sure you must be weary of the austerity of this place."

"What motive do you imagine Captain Kirk had for killing Ambassador Aala?" Spock asked.

"I see you have been thinking very deeply about this whole matter," Dfel said. "I had thought that a few hours enforced solitude might prove an aid to your concentration. As for your Captain's motives... Who knows?" It shrugged. "There were several factions opposed to our membership of the Federation. Perhaps your Captain was sympathetic to one of them. Perhaps he wanted to destroy our pleasant and profitable alliance with Moork. Whatever his reasons, we have sufficient evidence to convict him."

"Under your laws," Spock added.

Dfel shrugged again. "It is our planet, Commander... You must be most uncomfortable. Allow me to offer you a drink." He gestured to the pitcher. The third Oritasian guard stepped forward and poured a little of the water it contained into the bowl and held it out to Spock. "Drink, Commander," Dfel urged. "Slake your thirst." Spock took the bowl doubtfully. "And when you have refreshed yourself we will find out whether or not your stubborn attitude has altered."

Spock looked at him suspiciously and slowly raised the bowl to his lips.

The switch in Dfel's hand whipped out faster than the eye could follow, cutting the air inches from Spock's face. A fine line of blood appeared along his knuckles and began to drip emerald spots onto the floor.

The water in the bowl scarcely trembled. Spock set it down again on the stool and held the bleeding hand to him, nursing it.

Dfel bent down and dipped its fingers into the blood. It held them close to Spock's face. "A mere suggestion of what I can do to you with just this simple tool. You did not answer my question, Commander. Has your attitude altered?"

Spock said nothing, but in the dim light of the cell his face was set and his eyes defiant.

"I see it has not. Then we shall have to persuade you." He motioned to the guard who cleared pitcher and bowl from the stool with a single sweep. "On your knees, Commander. Lean over the stool - backwards. Backwards... That's better." Spock felt his wrists secured, tied tightly with thin cord. Dfel looked down at him, smiling slightly. "It is said that a Vulcan does not cry out in pain as a normal man does. It will be interesting to discover the truth."

Its eyes widened, bright with anticipation; the hand that held the switch rose.

Ambassador Chich gazed at them out of the screen, his bird eyes bright. "As I see it, Lieutenant-Commander Scott, the only way you can retrieve your missing officer is to prove to the Oritasians the innocence of your Captain. Present them with the murderer and I'm sure the Vulcan will be released."

"Aye, sir. But that'd take a lot of time. We've less than an hour till midnight. And that was the deadline they gave us. That's when they'll kill him."

"I do not think so, Lieutenant-Commander. To kill a Starfleet officer in cold blood would be a matter of galactic import. The political repercussions would be almost inconceivable. I do not think they would kill him. Not at midnight, without provocation. However, there are a number of unpleasant ordeals he could be put to. I suggest you make every attempt to find the assassin with the utmost speed."

"Aye. We'll do that, sir. But with less than an hour to go... Do you think you could intercede for us? Try to gain the poor man some time?"

"Well..." Chich looked as doubtful as his bony features would allow. "It's not really done, politically, to intercede for a member of another race. There's no precedent, you understand. If Vulcan had sent an Ambassador to the celebrations..." He shook his head. "In view of the circumstances, I will do what I can."

"Thank you, Your Excellency," Scott said. Chich nodded and the screen went blank.

"Trust the Vulcans never to be around when they're needed," McCoy grunted for the second time that day.

"Aye. But ye could hardly expect a Vulcan to attend a celebration by choice."

"I don't trust those Oritasians. I don't think they'll wait even till midnight before they start spreading his guts out on the floor. In fact I've an uncomfortable feeling in my bones that they've already..."

"Aye, Doctor," Scott agreed grimly. "I've got that same feeling." He went up the steps to the computer and studied the setting of the controls. "It looks as if the First Officer was beginning to work on the same lines that Ambassador Chich suggested before he was called away," he said. "If we go through these tapes there might be a lead to the assassin." He sat down and activated the console.

McCoy looked over his shoulder and wrung his hands together. "All right, Scotty. But hurry up! For God's sake, hurry up!"

It took a long time for Spock to get himself out of the unnatural bent-backwards position into which Dfel had forced him. He flopped down onto the floor and lay there, breathing harshly, his knees doubled up and his arms tightly wrapped around the pain. His wrists were raw where he had struggled with his bonds, his mouth numb and swollen where he had bitten his own flesh to keep himself silent, but his wrists and mouth hurt least of all.

It was late into the Oritasian night. He had been left alone with the pain and the blood for many hours. It hurt most of all when he breathed.

Eventually there was a sound beyond the door. Dfel entered once more, followed this time by only one guard. They were sure now that he was helpless.

Dfel looked down at him, curious, while the guard stood by holding another pitcher of water, a length of tube and a strip of stout cloth.

"It is midnight, Commander," Dfel said mildly. "It would seem that your crew is not going to be merciful towards you after all. A pity. But you have authority over them. You could order them...?"

Spock lay still and regarded him with dark hostile eyes.

"Very well," Dfel sighed. "It will be as you wish." It indicated the guard. "The position you were in, Commander, if you please. And it would assist us if you were to open your mouth voluntarily."

Spock raised himself painfully on an elbow and then brought his legs under him so that he knelt on the stone floor. The guard came round behind him, moving to the stool. He took a handful of hair from the Vulcan's crown, preparing to pull him backwards.

Spock braced himself against the pain and against the man. He pushed with his legs, driving straight up, his spine locked rigid. The man's fist, clenched in Spock's hair, smashed into his own face. He grunted and his grip loosened.

Spock spun on Dfel.

The Commissioner was only just starting to move. Spock leaped at him. Their hands clutched at each other's throats. Spock sought a nerve and found one. Dfel let out an anguished howl. Spock silenced it with a quick cuff to the face and pressed harder. The Commissioner's hands fell away and he relaxed onto the floor.

Spock stumbled to his feet, heading at once for the door. There

was another guard outside, smiling, listening for the next scream. Spock took one quick step behind him and his fingers locked onto the Oritasian's shoulder, feeling for the same nerve. He relieved the man of his sword as he dropped. There was no-one else in sight. If the scream had been heard, it had been assumed to be his own.

With the action temporarily over, his strength deserted him and the pain returned. He leaned against the wall for a moment, dizzy, one hand gripping the sword, the other holding his middle.

There was a grey stone passage to the right and to the left, leading out of the chamber. Both were featureless and filled with the same harsh light and deep shadows. Spock considered he knew well enough the way he had been brought in. He moved to the right, allowing his instinct to lead him upwards, and - he hoped - outwards.

As others - perhaps even less fortunate than himself - had found before him, there appeared to be very few guards in the internal passages of the prison. Moving silently and keeping in close against the walls and in the dark shadows where he could, Spock reached the massive bolted door that led to the courtyard of the prison before he was spotted.

With a shout, an Oritasian rushed at him, sword raised high. Spock put up his own acquired weapon to defend himself. The serrated teeth locked together in a bone-grinding crunch. The Oritasian gasped and Spock had a hand on his shoulder before he could recover himself. Spock turned to fend off another attack from behind. This guard came in low, hacking at the Vulcan's legs. Spock misjudged the height and parried himself out of trouble a fraction too late. He brought the butt of his own weapon down on the guard's head as he stumbled past, but he was bleeding from the thigh, cut deep by the savage blade.

He wrestled with the great bolts of the door, throwing down the sword as useless to him. He could no longer stand and fight.

The door opened ponderously. Beyond, the night was lit with the spotlights of the prison. Spock made his mind up quickly and ran for it, refusing even to limp on the injured leg.

The spotlights picked up his rapidly moving figure and chased him, hunting avidly. There was shouting behind him now, coming from the prison building. He heard the shrill scream of a high gain phaser beam, but he didn't see it or feel the heat of its impact.

The gate in the wall in front of him was open, but men were already moving in that direction to cut him off. Spock put his head down and drove himself as he had never done before. He was quite literally running for his life.

The gate came up before him. Beyond was the countryside, free and clear. The phaser gouged a hunk out of the wall beside him. He ducked low under the uplifted arm of a guard, and then he was through the gate, still running.

The confusion of the Oritasians mounted. Apparently they were unused to escapes from their fortress-like jail.

Spock ran across the road, put a hand to a fence post and leaped the wire. He landed on the gashed leg and it collapsed under him. He had no time to consider it. He drove himself back onto his feet, and ran on, limping now, over the soft uneven soil of the field. He

came to a hedge and forced himself through without feeling the tearing of the thorns.

There was no ground at all beyond the hedge, only what seemed to be a very long drop and then thick, foul water. Spock landed with a slurp in the mud, and lay still. He knew he ought to get up and somehow go on. But nothing seemed to work any more.

He lay back in the slime and closed his eyes, and for a long time he didn't know any more.

"Mr. Scott!" Chekov looked up sharply from the sensor. "I have a reading from the planet, sir. It... looks like a Vulcan."

Scott got quickly up from the computer and moved over to the sensor, McCoy crowding him. Scott readjusted the controls, and studied the shifting blue shadows.

"It's a Vulcan," he confirmed. "And outside the prison walls."

McCoy looked into the sensor, trying to make sense of the readings. "How did he manage that?" he demanded.

"God only knows, Doctor. But he's not moving now. We'd better get down there to him before those barbarians catch up with him."

McCoy finished tightening the bandage around Spock's body and went to wash his hands. Scott looked down at the Vulcan's face thoughtfully.

"Will he be all right, Doctor?"

"He should be. Those Oritasians certainly know how to cause pain. A man's stomach area's his most sensitive spot. Even if he is a Vulcan."

Spock stirred and opened his eyes. McCoy went over to look at him. "Are you in pain?"

"No." Spock tried to shake his head. "I don't feel anything."

"Good." McCoy smiled a thin smile. "That's what I intended. You're going to lie still, on your back, for a week."

"I can't!" Spock strained his muscles to get himself into a sitting position. McCoy, knowing approximately how far he'd get, made no attempt to stop him. Spock lay back with a sigh that was almost a groan.

"That'll teach you!" McCoy snarled. "Now do as you're told or I'll throw you out of here on your pointed ear."

"The Captain?" Spock asked.

"At the moment, I'd say he's slightly more healthy than you are."

Spock shook his head again and this time made a success of it. "No! The Ambassador! The murder!"

McCoy laid a gentle hand on his forehead. "He's fevered," he said to Scott.

"I'm all right!" Spock's denial was emphatic. He struggled valiantly to collect his wandering thoughts. "The murder charge!"

"Don't worry about that," McCoy told him. "Both you and he are safe aboard. That's all that matters at the moment."

"No!" Spock insisted. "The murderer'll get away!"

McCoy and Scott looked at each other over his body. "He won't rest, Scotty," McCoy said. "You'd better tell him."

"All right." Scott pulled up a chair and sat down. "The Doctor and I studied the computer tapes and then made a few investigations on our own. A deputation of Humans arrived on Oritanis two days ago. It turns out they're something to do with this Humanistic Spacial Society and they've been up to some odd things. We think that they had something to do with the Ambassador's death."

"And now will you rest?" McCoy asked viciously.

"No." Spock shook his head. "We have to stop them getting away." He made another concentrated effort to get up and this time McCoy pushed him back onto the bed.

"Spock, you're not going anywhere! Your leg looks as if someone's tried to hack it off. You burst those stitches, and I won't be responsible."

Spock lay back and sighed. "They have to be stopped, Doctor," he said. "If you bind the leg tightly enough - "

"All the binding on the ship wouldn't make any difference. You put any weight on that leg and you'll do it irreparable damage. You could give yourself a permanent limp. You could lose the leg. You could even bleed to death. You stay on your back, and *stay still*. If there's anything to be done, Scotty and I'll do it."

Spock looked up into his face, and McCoy met his gaze squarely with an icy blue stare of his own. Very slightly, the Vulcan nodded, and relaxed onto the bed.

The landing party materialised in one of the small squares that characterised the poorer part of the city. There were a few Oritasians about, idly curious. None of them made any sudden moves to summon the authorities. Scott gathered the men around him, and set off with determination for the lodging house where the Humanistic Spacial Society had taken up residence.

Scott ran up the usual native steps to the door and kicked it open.

The first person he saw in the doorway was Jim Kirk.

He didn't stop to think. A short stun burst felled the man into a senseless heap on the floor. Scott jumped over him and carried on.

There were two men and a hard-faced woman in an inside room. They scrambled to their feet at Scott's intrusion, but it was already

too late.

One of the men leaped for a thin folder of papers on a table. Scott grabbed him and spun him round by the arm, forcing his belly up hard against the table and twisting his wrist up between his shoulder blades. The man's weasel-thin face contorted.

"You'll break my arm!" he snarled.

Scott nodded agreement. "Aye. That I will. Unless I get some answers. One of you killed the Moorkan Ambassador, and had Captain Kirk blamed. Right?"

Weasel Face ground his teeth together and said nothing. Scott twisted his arm.

"Right?" he asked again.

Weasel Face uttered a strangled scream and nodded. "All right! Yes!"

"This'll prove it, sir." The Lieutenant held up a sheet of paper from the file. "Their plans are all written down on here, planned to the last minute."

"Aye. Then we'll get them back to the ship," Scott said with a smile of grim satisfaction.

The intercom in sickbay bleeped in the same moment that the sirens began to wail the red alert. Spock shot half way out of bed before a stab of pain reminded him. McCoy went past him to the intercom.

"Sickbay. McCoy."

"Lt. Sulu here, Doctor. We're under attack from Oritasian vessels."

"Well, what the blazes do you expect me to do about it?!" McCoy caught a movement in the corner of his eye and turned in time to see Spock trying to get out of bed. "Just a minute, Sulu. Spock! Get back in that bed!"

Spock glared frustration. "I have to get to the bridge!"

"Let Sulu handle it. There's nothing the Oritasians can do to us that won't bounce off the shields."

"And what about the landing party, Doctor?" Spock asked tensely. "We have to drop our shields to beam them aboard. The timing has to be absolutely right or we'll be blown to bits."

McCoy glared at him, breathing heavily, knowing that the Vulcan was right and not wanting to admit it.

"Get me some clothes," Spock said. "Doctor, if you don't help me, I'll walk there myself. As I am now."

"All right, Spock," McCoy agreed. "Don't move. Just wait 'til I get you your pants."

From the bridge the screaming of the sirens seemed remote. Detached. A sound that had nothing at all to do with the quiet efficiency of the command crew.

McCoy helped Spock down the steps to the command seat, a pale sweating figure swathed in bandages and limping heavily.

Spock looked at the screen. There was an Oritasian ship directly in the centre and coming across the bows of the starship. Even as he watched the small vessel unleashed a stream of orange energy from under her nose. The glowing patch grew until it filled the screen and then erupted into brilliance as it dispersed against the deflector shields. The first Oritasian ship passed on and was replaced immediately by another.

Sulu watched his instruments narrowly. "Coming into range, sir," he said. "They fire at about ten thousand kilometres."

"Thank you, Lieutenant." Spock touched a button under his hand. "Spock to landing party. Are you ready to come aboard, Mr. Scott?"

"Aye, sir. Ready and waiting."

"Stand by." Spock pressed another button. "Spock to transporter room. Prepare to beam landing party aboard."

"Locked on, sir. But we can't energise while the screens are still up!"

"I am well aware of that, crewman," Spock replied coldly. "Stand by, and beam on my word."

"Standing by, sir."

On the screen another orange balloon burst harmlessly against the deflectors.

"They're out to get you," McCoy said dryly. "You and the Captain."

"They have the courage of their convictions, Doctor," Spock remarked. "They are well aware that the armament of a starship could destroy them."

"You have a more forgiving nature than I gave you credit for," McCoy muttered. "Either that or you're still feverish!"

Spock raised an inquiring eyebrow at him. On the screen, an Oritasian ship fired its salvo at the starship and moved on. The energy charge dispersed.

"Lower the screens!" Spock snapped. "Transporter room, energise! You have seventeen seconds."

Whoever was in charge of the transporter room was too busy to respond. On the screen, yet another ship was swelling ominously. McCoy glanced at Spock. The Vulcan was quite relaxed, his face so bloodless it was almost white. For a moment McCoy thought... but Spock blinked and McCoy saw his chest rise.

The Oritasian ship spat orange fire. Sulu looked anxiously over his shoulder.

"Ten seconds, sir."

Very slightly, Spock inclined his head in acknowledgement. His eyes fixed immovably on the screen, he was counting down in his own mind, in his own language.

The orange beacon grew until it almost filled the screen, its edges foaming red fire. McCoy's hand gripped the back of the command seat so tightly that his knuckles turned white.

"Spock!" he grated. "Spock!!"

"Five seconds, sir. Four. Three. Two - "

"Screens," Spock ordered.

Sulu hit the switch and the deflector shields flared into life. The energy bolt hit them and blazed to destruction.

McCoy released a deep breath he didn't know he had been holding and flexed the tension out of his shoulders. "What about Scotty?" he demanded.

"I shall endeavour to find out, Doctor." Spock pressed the intercom button. "Spock to transporter room. Do you have Mr. Scott aboard?"

"Transporter room here, sir. Mr. Scott and party are aboard. And they've brought some guests."

"That's enough." McCoy reached across Spock and closed the channel. "You're going back to sickbay. And this time I'm going to get a stretcher and you'll ride!"

McCoy and his nurses were settling Spock back in bed when Scott arrived.

"We got 'em, sir!" He grinned. "And they admitted the whole thing. They intended to destroy the alliance with Moork and blame the whole thing on the Federation. They intended the Oritasians to have disposed of the Captain before anyone could argue about it. They knocked him on the head and took his phaser and communicator."

Spock frowned at him. "Ofel... said he had a witness. That the Captain had been seen."

"Aye," Scott agreed and turned to the door. "Bring him in, lads!"

A man was pushed through the doors by a pair of burly security guards. A man who was... almost Jim Kirk. Spock raised himself on his elbow and looked at him. The brown eyes were the same except that the smile was missing. The sweep of light brown hair was the same. From the left side, the face was that of Jim Kirk. Full face, the cheekbones were wider set and there was a vivid scar down his right cheek. Spock nodded his understanding and lay back wearily.

McCoy produced a hypo. "And now you're going to sleep," he said. "Like it or not."

Spock nodded and looked at Scott. "You have command, Engineer."

Take the Enterprise out of orbit. Arrange to transfer the prisoners to a starbase."

"Aye, sir," Scott nodded and watched McCoy press the hypo against Spock's shoulder. There was a hiss and the Vulcan's eyes closed.

Some way above Kirk's head there was an area of diamond facets that glowed with an internal light. His body was warm and comfortable and encased in a slinging sheath. The throbbing in his head decreased to an almost tolerable level, but there was a sharper, more intense headache pain beside his eyes that extended to his ears and his teeth. A mellow note beat a steady, regular tone and interspersing it at longer intervals was a deeper note. By rolling his eyes back as far as he could, he could just see the white dish of the medical scanner and the lower edge of the diagnostic screen.

There was movement beside him and he turned his head. His neck muscles screamed in protest and he gasped.

"Take it very gently now, Jim."

McCoy was there, a tall concerned figure standing over him. Kirk squinted his face into focus.

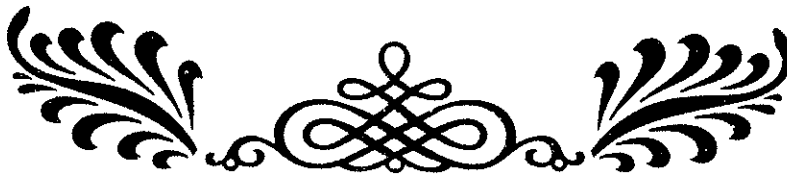
"Bones..."

"It's all right. You're safe aboard the Enterprise."

"Bones. There's a phaser missing. Someone could get hurt."

McCoy nodded and spared a glance for the man who slept in the next bed.

"Spock's already taken care of that," he said.



the SECRET



of the BLACK PLANET

The star had grown steadily on the central viewing screen all day, first emerging from the general haze of the star fields as a brighter point, gradually becoming more prominent until it dominated the surrounding space and finally taking on the appearance of a flat disk. The Enterprise coasted in at a speed far below that of light, her sensors probing and searching. Beneath the doleful glare of the dwarf her hull glowed an angry red and in the utter vacuum of space the shadows of her pylons were sharp edged and completely black.

On the bridge Captain Kirk drummed his fingers on the arm of his command seat. The crew was working quietly and efficiently but he sensed a certain tautness in the air, the expectancy of men and women tuned for action. Under the circumstances he supposed it was a natural reaction on their part. He would have admitted to feeling keyed up himself.

"Something in our path," Sulu said from the helm. "Dead ahead and drifting across our course."

Spock took up the report from the computer station. "I have it on sensors. Artificial. Metallic... By configuration a Federation survey vessel, class three."

Kirk sighed, not with relief, but with released tension. At least he knew now that he was looking in the right place. "The Anon?" he asked.

"It is reasonable to assume so," Spock agreed, looking over his shoulder.

"Coming into visual range," Sulu said.

A sharp nosed silver dart with stumpy wings and a broad base drifted lazily onto the screen. Kirk leaned forward, searching anxiously for signs of damage. The ship seemed intact, but at that distance it was difficult to be sure.

"Sensors indicate negative hull damage," Spock confirmed. "Life support systems functioning at a low level. Reserve energy levels satisfactory. No life form readings."

Kirk gazed at the compact little ship centred on the screen. "Abandoned," he said softly. "That explains why they've not been responding to Starfleet's enquiries. The question is, why did they leave, and where did they go?"

"Neither question can be answered at this point, Captain," Spock said, responding literally to a rhetorical remark. "The Anon was engaged in a general survey of this sector. She reported her arrival in this system and her crew remarked on nothing abnormal at that time. Indeed, the tone of their message indicates that they were finding their mission somewhat tedious. After that nothing more was heard from them."

"And that was seven months ago," Kirk added with a scowl. "Mr. Spock, I think you and I had better take a closer look at that survey

vessel, and we'd better take Mr. Scott along with us."

"Acknowledged, Captain."

Kirk got out of the command seat and turned towards the turbo-lift. "Lieutenant Uhura, inform Starfleet Command that we have located the Anon and are investigating."

Scott was waiting for them in the transporter room with his customary worried frown and a tricorder. Spock accepted a tricorder from the transporter attendant.

"Beam us directly to the bridge," Kirk ordered. "Mr. Scott, I want you to run a thorough check of the engines."

The three officers took their places on the transporter platform. "What I don't understand is," Kirk was saying, "why an entire ship's complement would abandon a functional and spaceworthy vessel in this God-forsaken..."

It was the Enterprise herself that interrupted him. She rang like a vast space-borne gong. The three officers looked inquiringly at the transporter attendant, who gazed back with helpless bewilderment.

"What the devil was that?!" Kirk demanded.

"I dinna know, but I don't like the sound o' it," Scott grumbled, leaving the platform and going to the intercom. "Scott to engineering."

Again the starship rang, a deep vibrant note that throbbed through every bulkhead, and this time she vibrated. Kirk and his officers had abandoned the transporter room and were already racing for their stations when the alert sirens began to howl.

When they reached the bridge Sulu was struggling with the helm.

"What is it?" Kirk demanded, leaping for the command seat.

"I don't know, sir. There's some sort of gravitational field dragging us off course. I can't hold her!"

"Maintain your position. Mr. Spock, what's out there?"

"At present unknown, Captain. I am attempting to locate the source of the influence."

"Are we holding our own?"

"Negative. We are being drawn towards it."

Kirk stabbed at the intercom button. "Scotty, we need more power. Something has us like a fish on a line, and it's reeling us in."

"I'm givin' you all the impulse power we have, Captain."

"To use warp speed would throw us out of the system, Captain," Spock said. "We would be no wiser as to the fate of the Anon's crew."

"That's very true, Mr. Spock, but I have no wish to follow them

to whatever their fate might have been without knowing something about it first. Hold her steady, Mr. Sulu. Resist with everything we've got."

"Captain, I have a sensor reading. A planetary body some sixty miles in diameter, in a close, almost perfectly circular orbit. It would appear to be at the centre of the gravity field."

"Sixty miles? That's nowhere near large enough to account for a gravitational disturbance of this intensity."

The Enterprise shook and a sound like the tolling of a death bell rang through her superstructure. "No known phenomenon would," Spock said in the silence that followed.

"Very well. Ease us into orbit around that planet, Mr. Spock. It seems we're invited so we might as well go willingly."

"Captain." Spock looked round from the sensor. "Such an orbit will take us into very near proximity with the sun. This planet maintains a similar position with its primary as does Mercury in your home system."

"Hm." Kirk pressed the intercom button. "Scotty, rig up some refrigeration for the outer hull. We're going in close."

"Aye, sir."

The eyes of the bridge crew fixed on the screen. At first there was only the dwarf star, sullen and red faced, pitted and pockmarked with sun spots. As the starship approached it grew until it overflowed the screen and spilt its light onto the bridge. The faces of those who watched turned red in the glare. The planetoid was a minute black spot floating against a crimson backdrop like a mote in an eye. Because of the brightness of the sun it was not until Sulu edged the ship into her orbit that it could be observed.

Its surface had been pitted and scarred by aeons of merciless bombardment and was a curiously uniform matt black. There was no glimmer of light anywhere, not even of reflected sunlight. Somehow the planet's surface was absorbing all the light that hit it.

"Curious." Kirk said. "I'd have thought that at those temperatures the rocks would have been red hot, flowing, with seas of molten metals."

"That should be the case," Spock agreed. "But sensors give no indication of any such conditions."

"No. I can see that. Mr. Sulu, what's our orbital status?"

"Good, sir. The gravity field is no longer interfering with our helm."

"Keep us in a polar orbit and keep us away from the bright side. I don't want the ship between the planet and the sun." Kirk touched the intercom switch. "Scotty, how long can we remain here in safety?"

"The refrigeration units should keep us safe and sound for forty-eight hours, sir."

"Good. Mr. Spock, I have a whole lot of questions concerning

this planet and I'd like you to find me some answers. A full report from all science departments in, say..."

"Captain Kirk." Uhura turned from the communications console, a hand to the transceiver in her ear and something akin to alarm on her face. "I'm receiving a transmission, sir."

"From the Anon?"

"No, sir. From the planet."

Kirk gaped at her. "But that's impossible! The temperature down there..."

Spock was already at Uhura's side, studying the console over her shoulder. "Nevertheless, Captain, the transmission is emanating from the planet," he confirmed. "On audio." He touched a coloured switch and the speaker crackled.

"Jim! Jim Kirk!" A breathless man's voice gasped. "This is Bill. Bill A'Mun! You've got to help us! Jim, you've got to..." The crackling increased and the voice faded out beneath it.

Kirk leaned anxiously on the balcony rail. "Spock?"

The Vulcan shook his head. "He's stopped transmitting, Captain."

"But he was on the planet? You're sure about that?" Kirk followed him back to the sensor.

"More probably inside it," Spock said, gazing into the blue light. "It was impossible to get an exact fix on the transmitter, but I did obtain a general area location."

"But Bill A'Mun, still alive after all this time? And why would he abandon his ship? He wasn't the sort to panic or act on impulse."

"Perhaps he did not abandon her out of choice." Spock made a fine adjustment. "I have it now, a cavern deep beneath the planet's surface. Atmosphere oxygen-nitrogen, temperature thirty-nine degrees, pressure rather low."

"Then it is possible that they're still alive down there?"

"Judging by the transmission just received it is highly probable that Captain A'Mun is alive. He called you by name, Captain, and as he could not have known in advance that you would be assigned to search for him..."

"He must have picked up our approach broadcast. Mr. Spock, set the transporter to beam us directly into that cavern. Have sickbay stand by to receive casualties. Doctor McCoy will accompany us."

The three Starship officers materialized in semi-darkness. The atmosphere was breathable but very cold after the precisely maintained temperature of the Enterprise and it had a peculiar taste that turned the mouth dry and sour. The low pressure made their ears pop and no amount of swallowing seemed to help. But most unpleasant of all was the silence, so intense that their own breathing raised echoes.

All about them was a sensation of space, and as their eyes adjusted they became aware of the vast fantastic chamber in which they stood. The floor was, in the area in which they stood, smooth and polished, hewn out of the naked rock itself. And the vaulted ceiling so high above their heads was supported upon an entire forest of crumbling pillars.

"I don't think you're gonna believe this, Jim," McCoy said in an awed whisper. "But I've got a feeling this place is man made."

"I concur, Doctor," Spock agreed. "At least in as much as the chamber is artificial."

Kirk nodded. "Under the circumstances I would be prepared to accept that."

Spock and McCoy looked at each other and at him, and then turned to see what their captain had seen.

The alien seated on the great stone throne lowered its drinking goblet and smiled at them disconcertingly, and for several long seconds the four regarded each other.

Kirk took two steps towards the throne. "Who... and what... are you?" he asked.

The alien's smile became broader. "Do I have to have a name, Captain Kirk? Yes, I suppose I do, otherwise things might become a little too complicated for you. Very well then, my name shall be whatever you decide to make it, and I am... whatever you would like me to be." He waved the goblet airily. "I have no preference."

Kirk glared. "I've no time for riddles and parlour tricks. You have the crew of a Federation vessel hidden away down here. You forced my ship into orbit around this planet and contrived to have us beam down here. I want those men returned right now, and I want an explanation!"

The pale, round face of the alien lost its smile and took on a slight pout. "You have a belligerent nature, Captain. Can't you see that your officers and your good self are my honoured guests? Why, I desire nothing more than to be of service to you."

"In that case," Kirk rested a foot on the bottommost of the throne steps, "as we are your guests and because you wish to be of service, you'll have no objection to bringing our associates here, or to telling us where they are so that we may go to them. We'll return at once to our ship. After all, we have no wish to outstay our welcome."

"Oh, don't be difficult, Captain." The alien said petulantly. He made a gesture in the air and the goblet vanished; and in its place in the alien's hand appeared a large blood red fruit the shape of a banana. The alien bit into it and the juice dribbled down its chin.

Kirk smiled a forced smile and made it look natural. "Then may I ask just why we are here?"

"As I said, you are my guests. My house guests. Do you like my house, Captain?"

The being was smiling again and Kirk decided to humour it. He looked round at the decaying masonry and crumbling brickwork. "Yes, it's... most impressive. Most impressive," he admitted.

"Yes, isn't it? The builders made a good job of it. Of course, there's a little touching up to be done here and there."

"Well, it's always the same with these older residences," Kirk sympathized. "A little repair work has to be done every now and again."

"Ah yes. Quite so." The alien's smile faded once more. "I really must see to that some time." It tossed the rind of its fruit aside and leaned forward. "You and I have similar interests and opinions, Captain Kirk. I can see that I am going to enjoy your visit."

"I'm glad of that," Kirk assured him. "But we really would like to see our friends."

A flicker of annoyance crossed the round face but vanished quickly. "I am going to show you something, Captain Kirk." The alien whispered confidentially. He gestured again in the air and this time when he lowered his hand he held a twisted staff. "Stand back a little, Captain, and watch this."

Kirk rejoined Spock and McCoy and the three officers stood in a tight knot, watching. The alien waved the staff in the air with the aplomb of a magician about to perform a conjuring trick, and that's just what he did. He threw the staff down at the foot of the throne steps. Immediately it writhed and twisted in on itself and became transformed into a hissing, spitting, many headed serpent.

The alien's chuckle became a full blooded howl of laughter as the starship officers recoiled. "Do not be afraid," he entreated. "He's my pet. Just one of my little pets. He won't hurt you. Come, Captain Kirk, pick him up! See how friendly he is."

Kirk took a doubtful step forward. McCoy caught his arm. "Jim! That thing's fangs are dripping poison!"

"I would advise against it, Captain," Spock agreed.

Kirk acknowledged the advice with a nod. "I don't think that now is a good time to back down from anything." He advanced cautiously on the minature wriggling monster.

"Take it by the tail, Captain. By the tail," the alien advised, its small bright eyes gleaming with excitement.

Feeling like Hercules facing the nine headed Hydra, Kirk wiped the sweat of his hands onto his shirt, bent down and gingerly picked the beast up. Instantly the tail twisted round his arm. The skin in his hand was dry and scaly and rasped against his own skin. The ruffled necks arched back on themselves and Kirk found himself looking past a dozen flickering tongues and down as many dark throats.

"Shake it, Captain. Not too hard." The alien told him.

Kirk scarcely needed to shake the creature, he was already trembling from head to toe. Before his eyes the slaving beast transformed itself into a length of green leafed vine which produced

buds and began to blossom as he watched.

The alien rocked back and forth in its seat and slapped his thighs in mirth. "Oh, what fun you are, Captain, and what a wonderful time we're going to have together."

Kirk looked up and met the eyes of Spock and McCoy, from whose faces the horror had not altogether faded. He flung the vine with its now fading blooms away from him and turned on the alien, his fists clenching in anger. "What do you mean by..."

A muted gonging sound interrupted him. The same sound he had heard aboard the Enterprise, but much more distant, and coming from beneath his feet.

"You must excuse me, Captain. Gentlemen." The alien smiled its flashing smile, gathered its garments about itself, and vanished.

Kirk stared at the empty throne for some seconds, his now useless anger fading. Then he turned. "Spock, what does the tricorder make of all this?"

The chamber snatched up the warbling whistle of the instrument, magnified it in some deep crevice and blasted in back at them tenfold. The effect was deafening. Determinedly Spock held the tricorder close to his face and watched the symbols flicker across the tiny screen.

"I read a power source, Captain. Well shielded and apparently below us, some twenty kilometers."

"That would make it right in the middle of the planet. Is it possible for a body this size to have a molten core?"

"Possible but highly unlikely. In any event this power is certainly artificially generated."

"What about life forms?"

"None registering, Captain. However, something is blocking the tricorder. I have conducted a complete scan and neither that being, nor we ourselves, registered as life forms."

"Then the tricorder isn't going to help us find Bill A'Mun and his crew. We'll have to set out and look for them on our own."

"I think we should return to the ship right now, Jim," McCoy said gravely.

"Bones?"

"Can't you feel what this low pressure is doing to your insides? Prolonged exposure could lead to severe and permanent internal damage. Death, even!"

For the first time Kirk noticed there was a band of constriction round his chest. Reluctantly he pulled out his communicator. "It'll be a whole lot harder to search this place in pressure suits."

"Mebbe," the Doctor growled. "But it'd be a whole lot safer."

"Kirk to Enterprise," Kirk called into the communicator. "Kirk to Enterprise. Come in, Scotty." He fiddled with the dial. "Kirk

to Enterprise. Spock, there's something wrong with this thing."

"Probably the same effect that's blocking the tricorder wavelengths is preventing our communicators from functioning." Spock took out his own and tested it briefly. "Dead, Captain."

"That's it then, Bones," Kirk sighed. "Until Scotty realizes something's wrong and sets about finding us, we're stuck down here with the low pressure. We might as well make use of the time searching for the crew of the Anon."

McCoy shook his head. "I don't agree. Physical exertion can hasten the onset of symptoms. We should just sit here quietly and wait!"

"Bones, Bill A'Mun's been here for seven months and he was still alive and well enough to talk to us just an hour ago. But of course, if you want to stay here and wait for our tricky friend to get back, well, I guess that's all right."

"You know I can't let you go wandering off on your own like that," McCoy grumbled, glaring. "One of you is bound to get hurt and need my help." Still muttering he set out with a grimly determined stride for the nearest heap of debris. Kirk winked at Spock and they fell into step behind him.

In the very best of conditions their progress would have been difficult and tiring. What had once been a superb architectural feat was quickly crumbling to ruin and decay. Many of the pillars had totally disintegrated into piles of dust and rubble over which the officers had to clamber. One had fallen intact and broken into several large pieces on impact and in places whole sections of intricately fluted ceiling had come crashing down to make still more litter on the floor and leave great revealing holes in the roof. Through these the natural blue black granite of the cavern was clearly visible. Kirk began to wonder just how safe the remaining structures were, but Spock was keeping a watchful eye on the tricorder and seemed unconcerned.

Before they had gone very far the lungs of all three men were feeling the strain of functioning in the low pressure. They panted and great plumes of steam streamed out of their mouths as the cold air condensed their breath. Jackets of steel tightened round their chests and frequently they had to stop and concentrate just on breathing. McCoy suffered most, and with his discomfort his concern for the other two increased.

Using the tricorder Spock guided them towards the only exit from the chamber that he could detect, a break in the rock almost a thousand meters distant. They had tortuously covered just over half that distance when Kirk heard the crack and the creak that foretold disaster. Spock was walking several yards ahead following a kind of path through one of the less cluttered areas. McCoy was labouring behind, but managing to keep up with the Vulcan's pace. Kirk heard the rumble and felt the light scattering of dust on his face.

Looking up he saw the impending avalanche. There was plenty of time for him to jump back out of the way, but not so for Spock who, intent on his tricorder, had not heard the warning of danger.

Without pausing a single instant for thought Kirk rushed

forward, lunging into the unsuspecting Vulcan's back, and sending him staggering. The two men hit the ground rolling, and in the same second one of the pillars bulged, cracked through the middle and collapsed in on itself, filling the air with dust and flying rubble. With a rending crash a great section of the roof tore itself free and with it came a granite boulder from the rock formation above. The boulder bounced once, rolled over and came to rest with considerable force against the Vulcan's side. Kirk heard him gasp.

For a long time, or so it seemed, Kirk lay with his face pressed to the floor while a torrent of smaller stones pattered around him. The thunder-like roar of the echoes died and finally the natural silence returned. Through it Kirk heard someone calling his name. The voice was McCoy's.

"Jim! Jim, are you all right?!"

Kirk sat up and rubbed some of the grit out of his eyes. "Bones? I'm all right!"

"Thank God." The echoes carried McCoy's heartfelt mutter. "What about Spock?"

"Spock!" Kirk squinted through the clouds of dust. The Vulcan was still lying face down in the rubble with a thick layer of dust over his back. Kirk scrambled over to him and lifted him bodily out of the dirt. "Spock, are you all right?!"

The Vulcan grunted and stirred and opened his eyes. There was a cut on his head just at the hairline but otherwise he seemed unharmed. He struggled to sit up. "Are you all right, Spock?" Kirk repeated.

"Thank you, Captain. I am undamaged. Bruises only. However, I fear the tricorder has fared poorly." He extracted the shattered instrument from the rubble and inspected it ruefully. "I regret it will be of no further use to us."

Kirk eyed the granite boulder. "I'm glad it was the tricorder and not your hip that was smashed. Do you think you can walk?"

Spock pulled a face and nodded and with Kirk's assistance got onto his feet. He swayed for a moment and then took his own weight. Kirk didn't see the momentary grimace of pain that passed over his features.

McCoy had found his own way round the debris and now he puffed up to them, very much out of breath. "Jim! Spock, are you hurt?" He peered anxiously at the green ooze on Spock's forehead, much to the Vulcan's distaste.

"No. We were lucky." The dust was clearing now and Kirk gazed round at their surroundings. "Spock, do you think your sense of direction can lead us to that opening without the tricorder?"

Spock nodded. "That way, Captain."

"Let's go then. We'll make a forced march, gentlemen, and rest when we get there. The sooner we're out of these ruins the safer we'll be."

Keeping closer together now they staggered on their way, leaving the tricorder behind them as a forlorn token of their passing.

A huge door had once graced the mighty walls of the chamber, but the door had long since disintegrated into nothing and now there was only a dark gaping hole. Gasping, their goal achieved, the three men sat down on the floor and put their heads between their knees. For a long time the echoes could repeat only the sound of their breathing. Kirk noticed in a distant sort of way that the sweat from his exertion was steaming as it dried on his skin. His clothes were soaked and he began to feel cold.

"Spock," McCoy panted at last. "I don't like that limp of yours. I want to take a look at those so-called bruises."

"There's no point, Doctor. We have not the facilities for treatment."

"Jim!" McCoy appealed to Kirk.

"He's right, Bones. The best any of us can do is try to find Bill A'Mun and that transmitter as quickly as possible. What do you think, Spock?"

"The transmitter is likely to be in close proximity to the power source."

"That's under twenty kilometers of solid rock, Spock!" McCoy hissed. "What do you propose to do, dig?!"

Spock ignored him. "I further suggest that Captain A'Mun will be somewhere near the transmitter."

Kirk got up, stretched and massaged his aching chest. "A logical assessment, Mr. Spock. I only hope our alien friend isn't playing some sort of elaborate trick on us."

"Just where did he go?" McCoy asked, looking round with a mixture of anger and anxiety. There was no certain answer to that and neither of the others bothered to make one.

Kirk tried his communicator once more, found it still inert and with a sigh put it away again. He surveyed the entrance, preferring not to dwell too much on the size of the beings that had built it. It was unlit, but in the faint light that spilled in from the chamber he could see a smooth - if dusty - floor, carved walls and arched ceiling, a passageway of vast dimensions.

He could feel his limbs stiffening up with the cold. Spock, despite the limp he was trying to hide, was on his feet and pacing back and forth in an effort to keep himself supple. McCoy was observing him with a sour medical eye that missed nothing.

"Gentlemen, I think it's time we made a further advance," Kirk announced. "This passage might lead to a way down."

"Twenty kilometers down?" McCoy inquired.

Kirk grinned at him. "Don't worry about it, Bones. That first step is always the worst."

To enter the passage required a definite act of will. It was black and forbidding, and with the darkness a claustrophobic oppression closed about them. It was essential to stay close to the wall, and to each other. To have become separated in that impenetrable darkness would have been to become completely lost.

At first the exercise was welcome; it warmed the body and was far preferable to the idleness of sitting still, but as they became more and more tired and short of breath their pace slowed and the cold began to seep into their limbs. They became mere automatons driven on by will and determination as the exhaustion and the cold and the lack of pressure took their toll.

They soon lost all sense of time and direction, and none of them, not even Spock, had any idea of how far they had travelled, stumbling and limping like blind men, feeling their way in the dark. None of them really cared. It was Spock who tripped and fell over a piece of broken masonry on the floor, and for several seconds he made no attempt to get up. Kirk and McCoy leaned against the wall panting, and then McCoy dropped to his knees, feeling for the Vulcan.

"Is it the pressure that's getting to him?" Kirk asked.

"No," McCoy's voice came back through the darkness. "It's not the pressure. With his lung arrangement he's better able to stand up to that than we are. It's the cold! He has to maintain a much higher body temperature than we do. He's suffering the first stages of hypothermia!"

"Can you do anything for him?"

"Here? In the dark? I can give him a shot to release his energy reserves, but when they're burned up he'll be totally exhausted."

"Give him the shot," Kirk ordered. He leaned against the wall and listened to the silence. Silence? He scowled, his ears straining, but the whisper of sound he thought he'd heard did not come again.

McCoy fumbled with the medical kit. "God almighty!" he muttered. "I wish there was some damned light!"

"Light, Doctor McCoy?" The voice was gleeful. "But of course! Behold, I grant your wish."

Around them the passage brightened with a greyish illumination and the painted eyes of the carved and painted creatures gazed down with interest from the walls. The change was so abrupt that McCoy all but injected himself with an empty hypo.

"You are my guests, gentlemen." The alien was saying aimlessly. "You have only to ask and I can fulfill any reasonable request. My role is one of provider..."

"I don't want any more of your damn tricks!" Kirk shouted, searching the empty air angrily. "Where are you?! Come out and show yourself!"

"I'm here, Captain."

Kirk turned, looked up and recoiled in startlement. The face of the alien was floating, disembodied, some three feet out of reach,

smiling its everlasting smile and watching him with tiny, vivid eyes. Kirk clenched his fists and gritted his teeth.

"Captain." The voice was Spock's, not much more than a whisper. Kirk crouched down beside him, his eyes still on the alien's face. "Captain, do not let it anger you. Your anger would evoke an unfavourable response, and with its peculiar thaumaturgic and telekinetic abilities this being's displeasure could have unfortunate results, both for ourselves and for the Enterprise."

Kirk nodded. "Humour it, you mean. I'll do my best, Mr. Spock." Moderating his rage he stood up and faced the alien. "We... are honoured to be your guests," he said, spreading his hands in his best friendly starship captain manner, "but we are basically different from you. We find your home uncomfortable. There's not enough air and it's too cold. My friend is suffering from the cold."

The alien scowled over Kirk's shoulder at Spock, who was sitting up and looking decidedly better after McCoy's medication. There was an expression of mean dislike on the being's face. "Your friend is no fun at all, Captain Kirk," it said unpleasantly.

"Fun?" Kirk shook his head in disbelief. "We didn't come here to provide you with fun! We came to find the crew of a Federation vessel."

The alien looked petulant. "You're not entering into the spirit of the thing, Captain. And besides, even I can't produce air out of thin air." The face frowned for a moment and then split in a dazzling smile at its own play on words. "Air out of air, Captain, see?"

Kirk favoured it with a withering look and turned his back on it. Slowly and deliberately he returned to Spock's side and crouched down. "Do you think you can travel?"

Spock nodded. "Most assuredly, Captain. I'm feeling much better. I don't know..."

"Never mind about that now." Kirk helped the Vulcan onto his feet. "I've made that thing mad and from now on we'll have to watch every step we take. If we're going to have a battle on our hands I want to choose the battlefield."

"We are ill equipped for such a conflict. Our chances are..."

"Mr. Spock, we don't have time to rationalize the odds." Kirk looked at the place where the alien's face had dissolved into a swirl of ectoplasm and vanished. "I've got a feeling that the closer we get to that power source the better off we'll be. Let's be on our way, gentlemen."

"Of course, Captain Kirk," the alien's voice came softly out of thin air, "I could make it warmer for you."

The passage, the whole world, turned upside down and tipped Kirk onto the floor. He cracked his head and for a moment unconsciousness threatened him. He sat up and found himself in different surroundings, and alone. He was in a low red rock tunnel lit with a diffuse light that filtered through the walls. It was like being inside the bloodless artery of some gigantic creature, and already the heat was drawing sweat from his body. Kirk recognized the place instantly; stored away in his memory were some very unpleasant

recollections. Two crewmen dead and another terribly maimed. He found that he was sniffing at the air, sensing about like a human bloodhound for the odour of the creatures that laboriously drilled these tunnels with their mandibles, and guarded them so jealously.

He sat down on the floor, ignoring clammy clothes and the trickle of sweat that ran down his back. Firmly he told himself that what was happening could not possibly be real, that it was an illusion conjured up by the alien from among his most feared memories. He had encountered such illusions before and had learned that they were harmless if one refused to believe in them. The rock however was very solid and very hard to sit on, and the blood red light was just as he remembered it.

Angrily he forced his mind away from such thoughts and focused his concern on the fates of Spock and McCoy. What private hells, he wondered, had the alien produced for them? At least here the air was breathable if tainted with an occasional whiff of the unpleasant musk. The beads of sweat on his forehead ran together and dripped off his nose in salty droplets.

Gradually, as memory reawakened, he recalled other details about these tunnels. Despite himself he remembered the curious audio qualities of the walls, the way the tiniest sound could travel through them to be heard distinctly up to a mile away. At first they had thought that the creatures had used sound to seek them out so efficiently, until they had discovered that they were totally deaf and hunted by scent alone. The temptation became irresistible. Kirk placed his ear against the wall and listened. For a moment there was nothing and then he heard, quite clearly, a voice. McCoy's voice, cursing fluently in a low monotone. Filled with sudden elation Kirk straightened up and shouted "Bones!". His head cracked on the low ceiling and he fell to his hands and knees, stars exploding before his eyes.

"Jim? Jim!" McCoy's voice came back through the whispering wall. "Jim, where are you?!"

Kirk was unable to answer. A trickle of blood ran down from a cut above his ear and stained the shoulder of his shirt.

"Jim!"

Kirk started to shake his spinning head and thought better of it. He put his mouth close to the rock and spoke in the loud whisper that travelled best through the rock.

"Bones, are you all right?"

The answer came back at once. "I'm fine. And Spock's with me. How about you?"

"I had a bumpy ride," Kirk said wryly.

"Jim!" McCoy's hiss was urgent. "Do you remember these tunnels?"

"Only too well. The first thing we've got to do is to get together."

"Captain." This time the voice coming through the wall was Spock's, and Kirk thought he sounded strained. "Without a tricorder the best thing to do in these circumstances is to take a rough

directional bearing with our communicators and then for you to try to move towards the sound of our voices."

Kirk pulled the device from his belt and flipped up the lid. "Will our communicators function this time?" he asked into the wall.

"That," said Spock, "remains to be seen."

Kirk adjusted the dial and immediately picked up a strong pulse. The implication was that none of the native rock of the black planet was between him and Spock, or that they were on a different planet altogether. A terrible planet Kirk had sworn never to set foot on again.

"Bearing three zero nine through one four, Captain," Spock said. "That is an approximate course. The twistings of the tunnels will take you out of your way."

Kirk knew only too well the dubious twistings of those tunnels. With the bearing established the communicator was of no further assistance but Kirk found its bleep a comfort, the only sign that he was not alone on this hostile world. With the device open in his hand he set out, walking in the stooped almost doubled posture that was torture to the back and thighs but was the only alternative to crawling.

He had not travelled very far when he heard the expected and dreaded rattle of chitinous plates.

Forgetting that the creatures had no hearing he instinctively snapped the communicator shut and shrank to the floor, making himself as nearly invisible as possible. There was no way of telling just where the creature was, or even in what direction. He knew from experience it could be a mile away, or just round the next bend, sniffing out his fear.

"Captain?" Spock asked through the wall, apparently aware through his silence that something was wrong.

"I hear one of them," Kirk hissed back.

Spock made no reply. He knew, as Kirk knew, that the captain was on his own. The tunnel filled with silence. Kirk's ears strained but the rattle was not repeated. He wiped the sweat from his face onto his already wet sleeve and with an effort forced himself to go on, approaching each bend with the utmost caution and checking his position both by voice and by communicator at frequent intervals. The tunnel forked, turned and twisted and forked again. The red light waxed and waned, but always there was enough to see his way by. There was no further evidence that the creatures were anywhere near. Kirk began to feel more confident.

Too confident. He was something less than careful as he rounded a sharp corner into an intersecting tunnel and found himself face to face with a prime adult male specimen of the species.

It was fortunate for Kirk that the creature happened to be curled in its sleeping posture, might even have been asleep, or he would have stood no chance at all. It uncoiled itself and whipped round, like lightning, but Kirk had moved equally fast. Out of sight in the adjoining tunnel he pressed his backbone hard against the rock wall and almost ceased to breath. He imagined the blunt almost blind head swinging back and forth as it quested for him, the stiff

bristles on its face quivering as they sifted the particles in the air, savouring his flavour and the grinding chewing actions of the mandibles as they anticipated the crunch of his bones. Those mandibles could sever a man's arm. Kirk knew they could, he'd seen them do it. He saw it still in the eye of his mind and the thought of it made him shudder and grow cold.

The creature moved. Kirk heard the shuffling of its double jointed insect-like legs and the clatter of loosely fitting scales on its body as it edged towards his hiding place, smelling him out. Kirk was sorely tempted to run for his life, but the creature could produce a remarkable turn of speed and could not be outpaced by human legs. The creature's shadow fell across the tunnel entrance and the head with its degenerate, almost useless eyes came into sight. Kirk backed away from it, refusing to acknowledge the sickening knot of fear in his belly and ignoring the screaming of instinct that told him to flee in terror.

There was only one way to fight these monstrous beasts, and Kirk had learned it the hard way. His phaser was already in his hand. All he could do was watch his step and wait his opportunity. The creature reared up on its back pairs of legs, the whole front of its body swinging from side to side as it ascertained his exact position.

Despite the fearful mandibles Kirk was not concentrating his attention on the head end. The chitin that formed the creature's armour was proof against all but prolonged phaser fire and he was aware of only one vulnerable spot. The tail section moved forward, the sting in its tip oozing dark purple poison. Kirk tensed, his eyes fixed on the spot. The muscles in the creature's body pulsed as it prepared to strike. The tail bent up and over like that of a scorpion, exposing the soft place on the underside of the abdomen. Kirk took careful aim with both hands and fired a low intensity beam.

The creature burst open. Kirk turned away from the outpouring and fled.

It was very difficult to run at full speed bent double in a low rock tunnel but fear can provide a man with extraordinary abilities and Kirk managed it extremely well. He only stopped running when he was crippled with cramp and able to run no further. He staggered to a halt, dropped to his hands and knees and hung his head, gasping. There was pain in his chest and legs and a red haze in front of his eyes. He could hear only the death rattle of the creature's scales and the scent of its musk remained strongly in his nostrils.

Gradually the painful throb of his heart steadied and slowed and he became able to think clearly once more. The noise was dying down as the creature's death throes ended, but its odour was still strong. Kirk recoiled in disgust as he realized that his clothes were splattered with its brownish blood. He pulled the shirt off over his head and flung it away from him, an instinctive reaction, but a wise one. The dead creature's companions would follow the scent of its blood.

"Jim? Jim, where are you? What's going on?" McCoy's voice demanded harshly through the wall. Kirk was surprised at how close he sounded.

"It's all right, Bones!" Kirk replied with a breathless attempt at levity. "A brief encounter. Scrub one nasty. From the sound of it I shall be with you in a few more minutes."

It was sheer luck that Kirk's blind rush had carried him in the right direction. Two turns of the tunnel brought him to a wider place where several passages intersected and it was there that he found Spock and McCoy. Kirk saw at once why Spock had suggested he do the walking. McCoy had bared his leg and was crouched beside him doing something that looked both complicated and painful and which Spock was tolerating with stoic disapproval. The Vulcan had a phaser in his hand and was evidently keeping a watchful eye on the tunnels.

The roof was high enough here to allow Kirk to stand almost upright. He did so with relief and took the strain off his knees and stretched. McCoy cast a professional eye over him.

"You'd better sit down and let me take a look at that head wound," he grumbled. "I'll be with you in just a minute."

Kirk was glad to obey. He watched McCoy load a hypo with skilled fingers, punch the contents into Spock's shoulder, and heard him mutter something into the Vulcan's ear about keeping his weight off it for a while. As Spock fastened his trousers Kirk caught sight of the vivid green bruising where the tricorder had been smashed against his hip. There was a lot of blood congested beneath the skin and it was this McCoy had been drawing off.

While Spock watched the tunnels McCoy turned his attention to Kirk, patching his head with antiseptic and plasti-skin from the medical kit.

"I don't give much for our chances of getting out of this place a second time," he murmured in a voice obviously meant for Kirk alone. Kirk remembered that Spock had not been with them on that first disastrous visit to these tunnels and probably didn't know what he was facing.

"This is all that alien's doing," he said. "Spock, what are the chances that this is all an elaborate illusion produced from my memories and Doctor McCoy's?"

Spock looked at him over his shoulder. "A possibility. Unprovable, Captain."

Kirk heaved a sigh. If the Vulcan's mind could not detect and break down an illusion he could not hope to do so. That left him one alternative. He assumed the most dignified position possible in the circumstances.

"All right," he declared, addressing the empty air with calmness and authority. "Whoever you are, wherever you are, I've had enough of this! We've played your games long enough!"

The alien gave no sign that it had heard. If the rock tunnels were indeed illusions they remained as solid and as real seeming as ever. Kirk searched the air but the alien was not prepared to show its face. "I want to talk!" Kirk persisted. "There must be some way to work this out!"

"It's no good, Jim," McCoy shook his head. "We're going to have to play this out as if it were real, and we'd better be on the move. Those monstrosities'll smell us out of here any minute."

"Can Spock walk on that leg?"

"I can walk, Captain," Spock assured him, already on his feet.

McCoy gazed at him doubtfully but said nothing.

Kirk looked at the various tunnel openings, trying to decide between them. One of them might lead to an opening to the surface, and ferocious as they were the creatures would not follow them into the sunlight. Kirk knew it was the only chance of safety for himself and his men, but the question was, which tunnel. The wrong choice would be rapidly and unpleasantly fatal. The rattle of distant scales hastened his decision.

The journey was hard on the back and harder still on the legs. The bent double posture was exhausting and made breathing difficult and the crack of a head on the rock ceiling became a frequent occurrence whenever someone tried inadvertently to straighten up.

The tunnel began to slope downwards, deeper into the scarlet rock, and Kirk knew it was a bad sign. If they continued to go down they would come eventually to the dormitories and nesting chambers and there there would be creatures in profusion. They came to no likely intersections and it was impossible to go back. There was at least one creature behind them, following their scent. They could hear the rattling of its scales through the walls and it was catching up fast.

It was getting hotter. The sweat was running from the humans and even Spock's face was covered with a thin film of moisture. Kirk realized almost too late that the increase in temperature was due to the close proximity of a nest. He smelt the fetid odour of creature musk and heard a rustle of sound. He grabbed Spock and McCoy by their arms and thrust them ahead of him into an intersecting tunnel bare seconds before a hurtling ball of black rattling fury flew past the entrance and back up the tunnel they'd just left. Spock stared after it in open amazement. It was the first he'd ever seen.

There was evidence that this tunnel was unused. There were small stones and dust on the floor, and fragments of the dry marsh grass the creatures collected at night and used as nesting material. A frequented tunnel was swept clean of this debris by the constant passage of the creature's bodies.

They quickly found out why the tunnel had been abandoned. It widened into a small chamber and lying across the entrance were the remains of its occupant. The creature had been dead a considerable time. The soft parts of the carcass had rotted away and all that remained was the hollow shells of the legs, the collapsed plates of chitin armour and the dreadful mandibles. Evidently each adult creature excavated its own chamber which it inhabited in life and which became its tomb in death.

To enter the chamber it was necessary to clamber over the empty shell. It was an unpleasant and difficult task and Kirk noticed that Spock was endeavouring to conceal pain. His face had become totally white and his lips were a tight line. Kirk remembered the earlier stimulant shot and wondered just how much longer the Vulcan could stay on his feet. McCoy also was showing signs of exhaustion. Kirk assisted him over the skeleton and found that his arms were shaking.

"Bones?" he asked softly, meaningfully.

The doctor looked him straight in the face with a defiant glare and that look was enough; the medic would go on until he dropped, and Kirk knew it. He nodded, just once, and McCoy disengaged his arm.

Unaware of the minor drama Spock was examining the chamber. It was just large enough for a full grown creature to turn round with ease, and it had several exits. One tunnel let steeply upwards. Kirk sniffed at the air. He could detect no trace of above ground freshness, only lingering musk. But any way up was a possible way out.

A sudden rattle of scales made them start and swing round, snatching at their phasers. There was movement in the tunnel from which they'd just emerged. Something black and ugly was swaying back and forth, sniffing the air.

For a moment they were frozen to the spot, then Kirk turned to the tunnel. "Let's get out of here before it catches our scent."

And so they began to climb. Kirk took the lead and forced the pace. He knew he was driving Spock and McCoy... and himself, to the limit, but there was no help for it. Through the tunnel walls he could hear the rattle of scales as the creatures gathered and converged. They were very close now, both behind and to either side. The only way was forward and up.

The sweat was pouring from all three men, the temperature and the exertion and the fear combining, and to add to the problem the tunnel began to grow steeper. They were reduced to crawling on hands and knees in an effort to make headway up the slope. The tunnel intersected, curved and took a final sharp turn upwards. At the top of an almost vertical, flawlessly smooth sided funnel Kirk could see a small 'O' of bright blue sky.

As far as he could see there was no way up. The funnel was too steep to climb, there were no hand holds and there was not time enough to blast steps. Kirk shook his head, bewildered and despairing, and then turned tensed and poised for action as McCoy gave a startled shout. One of the creatures was climbing the tunnel behind them, its facial hair quivering with excitement as it closed for the kill. It seemed to know that they were trapped.

When McCoy yelled, Spock spun round, his phaser ready in his hand, and it was just at that moment his bruised leg collapsed and folded under him. Before either Kirk or McCoy could do anything he had lost his footing and was on his side sliding back down the tunnel towards the approaching menace.

In a sort of slow motion Kirk saw the creature's sting rise up over its back, he glimpsed the look of absolute horror on McCoy's face, and closed his eyes tight.

"A most interesting encounter, Captain."

Kirk opened his eyes and once more found himself before the throne in the great ruined chamber beneath the surface of the black planet.

McCoy was at his side, looking very ill and a short distance away Spock lay huddled on the floor. As one man the doctor and the captain raced to his side. The Vulcan was shuddering.

"Bones!" Kirk cried. "Did that thing...?" But McCoy had already turned Spock over and Kirk could see that his face was not the terrible purple-black colour that the creatures' poison stained a man's flesh. Their environment had changed before the fatal blow had been struck.

"Of course, I could have let him die," the alien went on. "But that would have made you bitter, and that's the last thing I want to happen at this early stage in our relationship. I want us to be friends."

Kirk looked across Spock's body at McCoy. "Doctor?"

"Shock and exhaustion. He needs a chance to rest. He'll be all right."

The captain got to his feet and began to advance on the throne, his fists clenched into tight balls of bone and bloodless tissue and his eyes burning with the cold hard fire of hatred. The alien watched him come with a smile on its lips. In its hands it held a large golden ball and it played with this, tossing it gently from one hand to the other. Kirk's eyes were fixed on its neck. A thick white neck well padded with flesh and adorned with a band of glittering blood red stones. A neck Kirk had set his heart on breaking.

"Captain." The smile faded a little. "There's really no need to be so upset. You were never in any real danger. I could have pulled you out at any time." One at a time Kirk began to climb the throne steps. "Not all your experiences here need be so harassing," the alien assured him. "A little co-operation on your part and your sojourn could become most enjoyable."

Kirk heard McCoy shout, "Jim!" and found himself in an ornate gold and white chamber. The atmosphere was warm and scented with a heavy sweet odour that made him feel rather light headed. There was food and drink on a low splay legged table and a round gold quilted bed in the centre of the room that looked most inviting after the trials and terrors of the past hours. There was a golden carpet on the floor, the walls were hung with golden drapes and a single central lighting unit cast a gold glow over everything.

"Bones?" Kirk called. "Spock? McCoy?!"

There was no answer, but a movement in the corner of Kirk's eye induced him to turn. A slender female arm had pushed the heavy curtaining aside, and a woman now stood just inside the room. She was tall and slender and her skin was as golden as the furnishings. At the sight of her Kirk's breath caught in his throat and his rage died. But for the scant white threads that covered her most vital part she was naked. Her figure was firm, her skin flawless and the beauty of her face breathtaking. She looked at him a long moment and then began to walk slowly towards him, a slight seductive sway in her gait.

Kirk's hands unclenched. The sweet odour was having the most peculiar effect on him. He experienced the most curious stirring of excitement in the pit of his stomach. The woman had an alien grace that was fascinating, almost hypnotic. Her oval amber coloured eyes were fixed firmly on his face, her hair fell around her shoulders like a heavy honey coloured curtain, her aureate body swayed against him as she slipped her arms round his neck.

Kirk bent his face to hers and his lips closed on her soft bright bronze lips.

"Most pleasant, Captain. Don't you agree?" The alien asked.

Kirk broke away from the woman. The blind fury rekindled in his

breast and he spun round furiously. The being was nowhere to be seen.

"Where are you hiding?" Kirk demanded. "What game are you playing this time?"

There was no reply but the arms of the golden woman again slid round his neck. Kirk seized her roughly by the shoulders and thrust her away from him. She made a soft mewling sound and came forward again. Kirk slapped her hard across the face and flung her to the floor, her hair flying in a golden cloud.

"I won't have any more of your damned illusions!" he bellowed. "Do you hear me?!"

The woman and the golden room were no more and the alien frowned down at him from the throne. "You really are a most stubborn and difficult man, Captain Kirk," it sighed. "Perhaps it would be best if I showed you to your quarters and allowed your temper to cool."

Kirk directed a shaking finger. "Is this what you've been doing to Bill A'Mun and his crew for the past seven months?! Have you been torturing them and killing them for your own petty amusement?!"

The alien tossed the golden ball into the air and it vanished with a pop. It leaned forward and glared at Kirk. "I'm giving you the ideal opportunity to ask them for yourself, Captain," it said savagely. It made a sharp chopping gesture with its hands and then sat back in the throne with an expression of dissatisfaction across its features. It was alone in the great crumbling hall.

2

Through the thick, fuzzy barrier that separated him from awareness Kirk heard McCoy talking to him. The words and phrases meant nothing, and yet they served to stimulate his mind and dispel the nightmares that peopled his sleep. He felt little pain, only a numb deadness that extended from his body to the extremities of his limbs. He worried about that and then remembered that the doctor was at his side and no doubt responsible for his comparative comfort. The only discomfort was in his chest. His lungs ached when he breathed. He opened his eyes. In the dim light he could see McCoy's haggard profile, lined with concentration as he dressed a small wrist wound. It might have been the lighting, but to Kirk his face appeared grey. "Bones?" he inquired, and was surprised when his voice came out as a mere croak.

McCoy glanced at him. "Just take it easy and you'll be fine." His tone was terse and his attitude off-hand, distracted. Kirk knew something was wrong. McCoy sprayed a final coating of plasti-skin on the wound and swore with uncharacteristic viciousness when the canister gave out with an empty hiss. He flung it away from him and muttered, "now we're back to bandages, if there's anything round here clean enough!"

Kirk propped himself up on an elbow and saw that that was not at all likely. They were imprisoned in a large cage. The bars were of a tarnished silvery metal ornately cast and twisted into a strange network of designs, but it was still a cage. "Spock?" he asked.

McCoy nodded and Kirk looked in the direction of the nod. The Vulcan lay on his side in a corner, his knees tucked up almost under

his chin, either deeply asleep or drugged. Kirk was gratified to see the steady rise and fall of his rib cage. For the time being, at least, his life was secure.

Kirk became aware of other forms in the cage with them. Forms that were mere bundles of rags, and at the same time he noticed an unpleasant rank odour. He looked at McCoy who was gazing at him with hard angry eyes and a tight line where his lips should have been. Now Kirk was sure of it. The doctor's face was grey!"

"What... are they?" Kirk asked slowly, wary of the answer.

"Do I have to spell it out for you?" McCoy rasped. "Captain A'Mun and his crew. What's left of them!"

Kirk counted the pathetic heaps of blood and bone, twice, just to be sure. There were five. "Five," he murmured. "Five left from a crew of fifty eight."

"The dead are the lucky ones," McCoy said softly. "In all my years as a doctor I've never seen anything like it. And I hope I don't live to see it again."

"Is there anything we can do for them?"

"I've already done everything possible to make them comfortable. There's nothing anyone could do to save their lives. They all have completely collapsed and ruptured lungs. Three of them are unconscious with severe brain damage. The woman over there has gangrene in both legs. It's far too late to amputate!"

"What about Bill A'Mun?"

"He's conscious and just about rational. Over there."

Kirk tried to get up and gasped at the sudden stab of pain in his chest. With McCoy's help he made it on the second attempt and stood panting.

"Breathe as slowly and steadily as you can," McCoy advised. "That way you'll sustain less lung damage."

Kirk nodded his understanding and on unsteady legs made his way over to where his fellow captain lay face down on the naked rock floor. "Bill?" he crouched down and put a hand on the man's shoulder.

Beneath the paper like skin and the filthy rags that were all that remained of his clothing there was only bone. The flesh and the powerful muscles that Kirk remembered were wasted away to nothing. "Bill? Bill A'Mun?" Gently he lifted the man and turned him over onto his back. The rugged features that had once gazed down from the Star Fleet recruitment posters was now no more than bony projections and tight discoloured skin. The eyes, although open, were dim and wandered sightlessly.

Kirk repressed a shudder and bent close to the ruined face. "Bill? It's Jim. Jim Kirk of the Enterprise."

A'Mun's slack mouth moved, but no sound came out.

Kirk looked up as McCoy crouched on the other side of the man's body. "He was talking to me just a few hours ago," he said. "How is

that possible when he's... like this?"

"I'd say that this man hasn't been able to talk intelligibly for a long time."

"The alien playing tricks again?"

"I'd say that was a fair guess."

"So now we don't know if that transmitter even exists." Kirk sighed and looked down at A'Mun. "I have to talk to him, Bones. Ask him some questions."

"Well," McCoy pulled a hypo out of the medical kit. "He's dying anyway. A few hours, a day or two. It won't make much difference." He pushed the stimulant into the wasted shoulder and reached for the wrist. His face was intent as he felt for the labouring pulse, felt it speed up. He raised his eyes and nodded.

Kirk leaned over the dying man. "Captain A'Mun. Bill, it's Jim Kirk of the Enterprise. Can you hear me?"

A mixture of expressions crossed the ragged face and the eyes brightened a little. "Jim... Kirk?" The voice was no more than a whisper and the effort to speak brought on a savage fit of coughing. McCoy scowled but said nothing. The spasm passed. "Jim," A'Mun gasped. "Jim... The Enterprise! Go back, Jim! Go b..." He twisted, struggled to sit up and then collapsed again. There was saliva on his chin and it was stained with blood.

"Bill," Kirk said. "Is there any way to contact the Enterprise from here? A transmitter? We have to get a message out!"

A'Mun's head rolled towards him and the empty eyes gazed somewhere far beyond Kirk's face. "Transmitter?" the voice murmured, so low it could hardly be heard. "Yes. Below. A long long way below."

"How do we get there?" Kirk persisted intensely. "How do we get to it?"

The lips moved soundlessly. Kirk put his ear against them. "The whirlpool. Into the blue whirlpool."

"He's gone, Jim," McCoy said.

Kirk nodded and stood up. There was nothing even to cover the dead man's face. He turned away as McCoy straightened the limbs and closed the blind eyes.

"What did he say?" McCoy asked, joining him.

"There's a transmitter, and there's a way down," Kirk said, kneeling down stiffly beside the Vulcan. "Spock?" he touched his arm. "Spock."

Spock's eyes opened instantly as he came awake. He turned over and sat up and Kirk was pleased to see that at least in this instance McCoy's medications had been successful. Spock had regained most of his natural colouring and for a Vulcan he looked almost cheerful. The three men put their heads together for a council of war.

"We have to act before that alien comes to put us through some

more circus tricks," said Kirk. "One more performance like the last and none of us'll be in a condition to help ourselves, or the Enterprise. The first thing we have to do is find a way out of this cage. Gentlemen, shall we take a really careful look at these bars?"

The cage had been constructed a very long time ago. The bars were set into deep grooves in the rock floor, and the grooves had afterwards been filled with a mixture of resin and rock chippings. It was Kirk himself who found the place where the resin was cracked. He shook the bar experimentally. It was held absolutely firm and gave not the slightest fraction of an inch. Kirk called the Doctor over.

"Spock, do you think you can move it?"

Spock inspected the bar and flexed his hands. He gripped the bar and closed his eyes and began to twist.

The muscles of his arms and back swelled and the knuckles of his hands began to whiten as he increased the pressure. Kirk gritted his teeth in sympathy. The strain began to show on his face as he applied every ounce of immense inherited strength. The bar resisted. Spock stopped breathing and his face began to darken with effort. There were beads of sweat on his forehead.

McCoy glanced at Spock and the captain saw the anxiety in his eye. Had he set the Vulcan an impossible task that he'd burst his heart trying to achieve?

Kirk stepped forward and added his strength to Spock's, one hand above and one below the Vulcan's knotted fists. It seemed that no amount of pressure could succeed. Watching, McCoy sweated and chewed his lips and felt helpless. The blood began to pound in Kirk's head. Behind his tightly closed eyelids everything became red. His chest and arms screamed protest but he refused to allow his muscles to slacken. Instead he strained harder.

Something cracked. The bar grated and began to turn. The two men shifted their grip. The resin began to crumble and the bar got looser. With frantic determination they forced the bar backwards and forwards in the hole until it was enlarged. Then Spock gathered his strength and with a final great effort wrenched the bar out of the rock.

The gap wasn't very wide but somehow they squeezed through it, Kirk having the most difficulty. The entrance through which the light filtered was partially blocked with rubble. As the others climbed out McCoy cast a tragic look over his shoulder at the cage where his mortally ill patients still lay. He knew he must leave them, but he felt that he left part of himself behind also.

"Bones," Kirk called.

McCoy accepted the offered hand and pulled himself up over the rubble.

Beyond the entrance was a passageway, either the same one they had been in before or an exactly similar one with an even paved flooring and walls carved and painted into the forms of inconceivable beasts. Kirk decided upon the direction and boldly took the lead.

The walking was easier than before and now they had their second wind. Spock's hip troubled him only a little and both he and McCoy

found they could keep up with Kirk's pace. The exertion kept them warm and in the suffuse, sometimes shifting light they made good time.

The passageway turned and subdivided several times and each time Kirk made an instant decision, relying on his command instinct, and neither of his officers hesitated or questioned him. The captain's mind was working hard, turning over and over the words, the last dying words of Captain William P. A'Mun, late of the S.S. Anon. It was a riddle and he could find no solution to it. He arrived time and again at the same inevitable conclusion, that this strange black planet that orbited where no habitable world had any right to be and housed a clever and unspeakable cruel alien being, had yet more secrets to reveal.

Kirk felt a strong driving need to hurry. Their escape could not long go unnoticed by the alien and he knew it would not go unpunished. The being would not consider simple death severe enough retribution for this further defiance and he feared what it might do.

The passageway ended, finally, in yet another arched doorway, and here the massive black metal studded doors still hung on their hinges. They stood wide open. The chamber was circular, with intricate carving both on the walls and the domed ceiling. In the centre of the floor there was a deep well. Cautiously the three officers approached the lip and looked down. It appeared bottomless. There was a curious darkening effect that absorbed all the light from the chamber and the pit was absolutely black.

Behind their backs the great double doors slammed shut. The three men jumped round and stared at them as the reverberations rolled round the dome. They looked quite immovable but Kirk and Spock went to find out anyway. Even if the doors were not locked they were too heavy for all their combined strength to move. There was no other way out of the circular hall.

"Jim," McCoy said uncertainly. "I think you should take a look at this." Funnelled upwards by the vastness of the dome his voice sounded frighteningly small.

Kirk and Spock returned to his side and looked down into the pit. Something was forming in the swirling black mists, something that was taking on a terrifyingly familiar shape, and beginning to grow.

Kirk felt the blood drain from his face, and he saw that Spock and McCoy had also grown pale. They all shared the same sinister feeling, that what was about to happen would in no way be an illusion.

At Kirk's signal they withdrew to the wall and there they waited with their phasers ready in their hands. Each saw clearly in his own mind the process that was taking place in the pit, the transformation that was with alarming speed bringing forth from a shapeless embryo a terrible monster. But not for long were they left to the dubious mercies of their imaginations. Within minutes the first ugly head reared above the lip of the pit. It was the same many headed serpent that Kirk had confronted on the steps of the throne, but now it was more than twenty feet in length.

From its vantage point high in the domed roof the alien clasped its hands in glee and rocked backwards and forwards in anticipation.

The creature emerged from the pit like a dragon from the gates of Hades, and one by one its emerald, fire bright eyes fell upon the trio and its many heads swung towards them. Kirk made an open handed gesture and Spock and McCoy moved away from him, spreading out to divide the creature's attention. Regrettably the creature had plenty of attention to divide. Its necks weaved and swayed and the heads had enough eyes between them to watch four times their number of men. It inched forward on its belly, its body moving inside its skin in a snakelike manner. Each head had a forked, flickering tongue, a dark ridged mouth and two white grooved fangs which, at these proportions, could impale a man's body. The creature spat, and the poison that dropped from the fangs lay on the floor in bubbling green pools and acid fumes began to boil off into the air. A near miss would certainly be fatal.

Kirk and his men took careful aim and fired in unison. All three beams were accurate. Three of the creatures heads glowed with insane light as the phaser energy induced molecules to return to their basic elemental state. The decapitated necks flayed for a moment, and then, exactly like the mythical hydra of legend two new heads regenerated where before there had been one. Momentarily stunned the officers ceased fire but the creature was undaunted. It continued to advance.

Fast as they could cull the heads, the creature could reproduce them faster. Soon it was bristling with more than a hundred, each as large and venomous as the originals, and its strength was in no way diminished. But it was obvious to all three officers that the power in their side arms would not last for long. Kirk waited until the creature was almost within striking distance and then gave the signal to break and run. They regrouped on the far side of the hall while the beast performed a somewhat ponderous turn. Speed did not seem to be its particular asset, but then, it had assets enough.

Hastily Kirk explained his direct and dangerous plan.

"Captain," said Spock, "I suggest that I perform this task. I can run somewhat faster than you."

Kirk's lips quirked. He knew that now of all times he had the Vulcan cold, pinned by his pointed ears. "With that leg, Mr. Spock?" he inquired gently. "I would hardly think so."

"But, Captain, I..." Spock began.

Kirk shook his head. "In logic, Mr. Spock, you must agree that I am the best man for the job. Don't you agree, Doctor McCoy?"

"I think you're both out of your minds!" McCoy hissed furiously. "Even if you can make it there's no guarantee that it's going to work!"

"We don't have any guarantees, Doctor. And we don't have very much power left in our phasers either," Kirk told him tightly. "You'll stay here, Mr. Spock, and that's an order. We hold our fire until the last possible moment, and then give me all the cover you can."

Spock and McCoy nodded reluctantly, conceding defeat, and the three waited in a close huddle, their eyes fixed on the approaching monster.

It got so close that they could smell the stench of rancid meat

from its mouths and hear the hiss of its many breaths. On either side of Kirk, Spock and McCoy took careful aim as the creature reared up to strike. Kirk waited a brief instant while the last of the heads lifted, and then he rushed in beneath them.

The beast knew at once that it had been tricked. Its necks lashed back and down, bending themselves double to get at him, but the phaser fire from Spock and McCoy was lethally accurate. Kirk found he had plenty of time to find the exact place where the great heart beat and take a true aim.

The creature uttered a terrible scream from all its multitude of mouths. The body crashed to the floor and in falling it knocked Kirk off his feet and dealt him a stunning blow. As it lashed its death throes he lay limp and all but senseless.

Only when the clashing of jaws and the rattling of teeth had finally ceased did Spock and McCoy dare approach to ascertain the fate of their captain. McCoy felt for a pulse and declared him alive. With Spock's help he dragged him clear of the creature's body and Spock stood by with a very unVulcan, expressive look of anxiety on his face while McCoy made a detailed examination. The doctor grunted uninformatively, loaded his last dose of stimulant into the hypo and shot it into Kirk's arm.

Kirk groaned and stirred and tried to sit up. "Take it easy," McCoy told him. He was beginning to feel that use was wearing the effect of those words a little thin.

Kirk looked from McCoy to Spock and back and was relieved to find both men intact. "The creature?" he asked.

"Dead, Captain. And returning to the dust from which it came," Spock quoted biblically.

Kirk and McCoy looked and saw that what he said was true. The remains were shrivelling and changing form until at last they had withered away into nothing.

"May I congratulate you on a most excellent shot, Captain?" asked Spock.

"I think we should keep any congratulations until later, Mr. Spock," Kirk advised. "I'm surprised that that alien hasn't put in an appearance. It must want to know what happened to its little pet."

"It is a probability, Captain," Spock said with slow thoughtfulness, "that the alien was feeding energy to the creature through its own mental processes. If so, the subsequent destruction of the creature must have stunned it, at the very least."

Kirk got to his feet. "If it's out of action now's our chance to move against it. We have to find the source of its power and disable it before it recovers," he declared. And then he realized with a jolt that there was no move they could make. The great black doors were still tightly closed, and even if they'd been open he now had no idea which way to turn. His instinct had led him here to near disaster and now it had abandoned him utterly.

He was on the verge of admitting his bewilderment when McCoy seized his arm. "Jim! Jim, look at the pit!"

There was certainly something strange happening to the central well. It was no longer dark; indeed it was lit from within by a strange blue light. As they watched it filled eerily and silently to the brim with a gleaming blue substance streaked with white and spinning at high speed to produce a vortex at the centre - without doubt the blue whirlpool A'Mun had spoken of.

In silence the three officers approached it. Although travelling at great speed the blue streaks and the white remained entirely separate, and the whole mass glowed with enough light to cast blueness into the furthest corner of the dome. Kirk's instinct had not been at fault after all, and now, with the influence of the alien removed, the phenomenon was free to return to its natural state.

"Opinion, Mr. Spock?" Kirk asked in a quiet, almost awed tone.

Spock eyed the whirlpool. "Without instrumentation my opinion would, at best, be a guess, Captain."

"Then guess, Mr. Spock."

"An energy field, and one of considerable ability. The light is residue energy being radiated in a harmless form. The swirling motion is probably connected with its function."

"The way down," Kirk said. "Bill A'Mun said that the blue whirlpool was the way down... to the transmitter and to the energy source we located when we first arrived."

"What do you intend to do with it now that you've found it?" McCoy demanded. "It's built into this place! It was made by the original inhabitants and they might have been so different from us that the forces in that field would tear us limb from limb!"

"Bill A'Mun knew," Kirk said. "He said, 'Into the blue whirlpool'."

"He was insane with pain! He was dying! He was sending us to our deaths!" McCoy snarled.

"No." Kirk shook his head. "First of all he told me to take the Enterprise back. He was trying to save us. We don't have much choice, gentlemen, and we don't have very much time. As far as we know this is the only way down to that power source, and we have to make use of it before that alien recovers enough to make more trouble."

"Jim..." McCoy began, preparing for an all out argument.

Kirk waved his unvoiced objections aside. "We don't have time, Doctor. I'll go first, Mr. Spock. You'll follow me." He took a step forward so that he stood on the very edge of the whirlpool and looked down. The surface was quite opaque and moving very fast. It looked almost solid. Kirk put one foot out and watched as it sank in to the ankle. The current tugged at him. Carefully Kirk shifted his weight and transferred his other foot to the whirlpool. There was nothing beneath his feet and yet he did not fall. The whirlpool carried him with it, moving him steadily towards the centre.

Spock and McCoy stood and watched helplessly as Kirk was swept out and round, gradually sinking deeper, to his hips and then to his shoulders, until at last only his head was visible as he approached

the vortex. He vanished beneath the surface and there was no trace left. For several moments more they remained silent and still, and then McCoy looked at the Vulcan. "Are you going to follow him into that?"

Spock didn't take his eyes from the vortex where Kirk had disappeared. He inclined his head. "I have my orders, Doctor," he said, and walked forward into the pool.

McCoy stood alone in the circular hall and gazed at the whirlpool. "Orders or not you'd follow him," he muttered. "And I guess I would as well. We must all be out of our minds!"

The sensations associated with entering the vortex were those of giddiness and nausea and a long weightless drop. The speed of the vortex was such that it sucked them downwards and they fell faster and faster with the blue and the white of the whirlpool flashing around them with an ever increasing velocity until they were nothing but blurs. Despite the force of the energy there was no other discomfort involved in the descent and gradually, as they fell closer to the centre of the planet the air became thicker and warmer and for the first time in many hours they were able to breathe in comfort. The relief was almost painful.

Despite the speed of their descent it took a long time and when the vortex deposited them gently on the floor of another similar hall they were all in a dazed semi-conscious condition. Kirk sat up and gazed at the wisp of blueness in the high dome, all that was visible of the blue whirlpool.

"I take back all I ever said about the transporter," McCoy grumbled. "Compared with that it's the only way to travel."

"A most interesting device," Spock remarked, referring evidently to the whirlpool and not the transporter.

"We don't have time to be interested, Mr. Spock," Kirk told him firmly. "We have to find that transmitter and get ourselves beamed out of here. One well aimed photon torpedo should blow this planet into the sun and that alien along with it."

The entire centre of the planetoid had been hollowed out into a single vast chamber, and that chamber was filled with consoles and control panels. The starship officers stood in the arched entrance in awe. The equipment was evidently as old as the planet itself. It was bedded in solid rock, but despite its age it was as bright and new looking as the day it was first installed. Banks of multi-coloured lights flashed steadily in relays and the dials and meters all seemed to be working. The complex was certainly functional, if operating at a low level of efficiency. Overhead and all round the walls gold coloured pipes coiled one on top of the other, completely concealing the walls and ceiling of the chamber, and from these pipes came a low background hum. Everything was built on a scale for creatures at least three times the size of a human being.

"Do you see anything that looks even remotely like a transmitter, Mr. Spock?" Kirk asked in a hushed voice.

Spock was hardly listening to him. "Captain, this is a most remarkable discovery. This complex, these controls, they indicate that this entire planet has actually been equipped as a deep space vessel. Over there are the power inductors for the main drives, and they're the equivalent to our warp power conversion units."

Kirk stared at him. "But how could you produce sufficient power to move a planet from system to system in and out of orbit? The gravitational forces alone would..."

"The surface of the planet itself, Captain," Spock reminded him. "It presents a perfect matt black surface to the sun at all times. A perfect absorber of solar energy. And that energy would be converted into warp power by linear acceleration through these tubes." He indicated the walls.

"An atom smasher," Kirk said.

"Indeed. And on a gigantic scale. At the moment it's working at only a tiny fraction of its operational capacity. If we could increase..."

Kirk held up a staying hand. "We're not going to increase anything, Mr. Spock. The alien's drawing the energy for its tricks from this installation. Obviously it doesn't know how to handle it or it'd be a lot more omnipotent than it is. I'm not about to give it tuition, and neither are you. Now let's find that transmitter."

Spock quickly identified the relevant piece of equipment and although it was alien in design and several sizes too large for him he soon had it working.

"Kirk to Enterprise," Kirk called experimentally into the curiously designed speaker. "Kirk to Enterprise."

"Captain Kirk!" It was Scott's voice sounding strangely tinny but jubilant. "We've been trying to reach you for two days, sir. Our orbit's reaching a critical condition, an'..."

"Never mind, Mr. Scott. Lock on to our co-ordinates and prepare to beam us aboard."

"The transporter room's all ready for you, sir."

"Very well, then..." Abruptly the transmitter crackled and spat a fat spark at him.

"Jim," McCoy said as Kirk recoiled.

Kirk turned and found the alien sitting on top of a tall console smiling at him. "Stand by, Mr. Scott," he said.

"Leaving so soon, Captain Kirk?" The alien inquired with dangerous softness.

"We're leaving," Kirk told it. "And when we've gone we'll take steps to destroy this planet and everything it contains. Including you!"

Still smiling the alien shook its head. "I think not, Captain. On the contrary, I think you'll invite the whole of your crew down to join you here. I have room for all. Unless you would prefer to see these two men with you die, here and now?"

As he spoke Kirk heard a strangling sound from behind him. He spun round in time to see Spock and McCoy drop to their knees, their hands clasped to their throats as unseen hands began to choke the life out of them.

"Scotty!" Kirk shouted into the transmitter. "Beam us aboard! Fast!"

"I canna, sir!" Scott's voice was a wail. "Somethin's blockin' the transporter!"

"You have your choice, Captain Kirk," the alien chortled. "Will you sacrifice these men now, or will you sway to my demands in the hope of getting the better of me later? You won't, you know. But on the other hand I already have your ship, and I shall have your crew, one way or another."

"Bones!" Kirk dropped to his knees beside the writhing doctor, trying desperately to free his throat. It was useless.

"Make up your mind, Captain," the alien chided him. "You don't have much time. How long can one of your species survive without air? Two minutes? Three? It will be interesting to find out."

Kirk glared at it. "I'm not giving way to you. I won't stand by and see my crew tortured!"

"But that's just what you are doing!" the alien declared with a laugh.

Kirk stood up and took a step forward. "I'll kill you. Somehow I'll find a way to kill you!"

With a lunge that took the last of his strength Spock came to his feet and staggered past Kirk, heading for the alien. Even if he had any clear idea of his intention no one else did; in any event he covered only half the distance before pitching forward onto his face, but his effort was sufficient to divert the alien's attention for the split second Kirk needed. The captain snatched out his phaser and fired.

The alien was far too quick to be hit. The beam burned on through the place where it had been sitting and scorched its way into a bank of machinery beyond. There was a flash that lit the entire chamber, green and blue and white sparks began to like rain, and the background hum grew louder, becoming a powerful drone. The lights on the consoles became more active as the power flowing through them increased.

From somewhere the voice of the alien came, raised high in a long agonized scream as the awakened power of the planet ship burned through its brain and destroyed it.

On the floor the twisted bodies of Spock and McCoy relaxed. Kirk raced to the Vulcan. "Spock?!"

Spock clutched at his arm. "The accelerator... running wild!" he gasped.

"Yes, I can hear it." Kirk looked at the flashing consoles. "How long do we have?"

"Minutes... minutes only!"

"Come on!" Kirk picked him up by the armpits and half dragging, half carrying him, got him over to where McCoy lay, panting.

"Scotty! Is the transporter clear yet?!"

"Aye, sir."

"Leave orbit as soon as we're aboard! Energize!"

The Enterprise turned her bow away from the black planet and leapt for the security of interstellar space. Moments later, in her wake, a tiny new star burned briefly and died beside an aging dwarf.

